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Merce Cunningham: The Accidental Icon

Jennifer Harris

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of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in Art History

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Introduction

Merce Cunningham: The Accidental Icon

“I think I am as American as anybody else is, as far as that goes, it’s possible that in America the climate, by that I mean the situation and everything, conspires to bring this about.”¹

Merce Cunningham is widely acknowledged as one of America’s most important choreographers of the twentieth century. Known for his non-hierarchical treatment of the stage space and his expansion of the very notion of dance movement, Cunningham can be credited with introducing Dada- and Zen Buddhist-inspired principals of chance into a discipline that was weighed down by the “cliché” tradition of narrative and self-expression. Given these and numerous additional innovations, it is conceivable that in the history of modern dance, Cunningham has had the greatest impact. Yet, in December 2011, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company dissolved, following an elaborate two-year “Legacy Plan,” which was conceived of by Cunningham himself prior to his death in 2009. This celebration of the company’s history and “roadmap” for its conclusion consists of five key components that were organized by the Cunningham Dance Foundation: the preservation of Cunningham’s dances and choreographic process through the creation of digital “Dance Capsules;” supplemental compensation to be given to the company’s dancers, musicians, and staff; the transition from the Cunningham Dance Foundation (founded in 1964 to fund the company’s first world tour) to the Merce Cunningham Trust (established by Cunningham in 2000) which will manage the rights to Cunningham’s work; the preservation of the company’s sets and costumes through their placement in the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; and lastly, the final two-year worldwide “Legacy Tour,” which culminated in site-specific performances in New York City’s Park Avenue Armory, itself a historic monument of New York City.

¹ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance: Merce Cunningham in conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve*. New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1985, 130.

In the final moments of the Legacy Tour, critics mourned the company's departure. Joan Acocella, dance critic for *The New Yorker*, wrote:

[...] it seems to me that [Cunningham's] absence will have a terrible effect. Dance is a small field, and any major loss, even if people eventually forget it, is not without consequence. I try to think what other artist Cunningham was like. All I can come up with is Blake. Cunningham was that clear, that unpretentious, that visionary, in a modernist way. Now that he is gone, his kind of blunt beauty will vanish from dance. Maybe, in twenty years, a different master will revive it. Or maybe it will just die.²

Though dance companies fold with unfortunate regularity, experts like Acocella considered the closure of Cunningham's company in particular to mark the end of an era, a profound loss indeed. This moment calls for a closer look at Cunningham's legacy as an American icon: how did this happen? And what does it mean?

Initially working in obscurity, but eventually rising to the forefront of experiments across media, Cunningham helped to define the future of American modern dance. Born in Centralia, Washington, he moved to New York in the fall of 1939 after Martha Graham invited him to perform as a soloist with her company. In 1944, he presented his first experimental concert with John Cage who would become his life partner and most important collaborator until Cage's death in 1992. After dancing with Graham for six years, Cunningham left in 1945 to pursue experiments in chance and indeterminacy alongside Cage. Between 1948 and 1952, they spent extended periods of time at Black Mountain College, a hotbed of intellectual activity where artists' ideas circulated across disciplines. In this context, Cunningham formed the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in the summer of 1953. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the company traveled around the country, performing primarily at colleges and universities. In 1964, the company performed internationally for the first time, traveling extensively throughout Europe and Asia. Cunningham continued to choreograph dances until the end of his life, forging

² Joan Acocella, "Chance Encounter: Merce Cunningham bows down." *The New Yorker* (January 16, 2012).

new experiments in the use of film and computer programming. Over the course of his sixty-five year career, Cunningham established himself as one of the most inventive choreographers of the twentieth century, particularly in his Neo-Dada experiments in chance and his collaborations with numerous musicians and visual artists, among them, John Cage, David Tudor, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns.

The historic moment and the Legacy Tour has generated quite a bit of excitement in and outside the dance community, perhaps most prominently in the realm of museums, with related exhibitions and programming at the New Museum, the Walker Art Center, the Brooklyn Museum, the Sundt Gallery at the University of Arkansas, Loretta Howard gallery, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among other institutions. Cunningham's collaborations with filmmaker Charles Atlas were also featured in the programming of the 2012 Whitney Biennial, asserting Cunningham's place within the context of the most cutting-edge experiments in performance art. Simultaneously, several politicians pledged both symbolic and financial support for the company's Legacy Tour. Rahm Emmanuel, Mayor of Chicago (and a former ballet dancer), for example, proclaimed November 18, 2011 to be "National Merce Cunningham Day," in support of the company's final visit to Chicago. Perhaps more significantly, the U.S. State Department helped to fund and organize the company's Legacy Tour performances in Moscow in June 2011, as part of its effort to improve diplomatic relations with Russia.

This last example of public support is particularly poignant in relation to the narrative of the Cunningham company's unusual rise to becoming an American institution. In the early years of the company's history and until the late-1960s, Cunningham's work was not perceived as adequately influential nor taken seriously enough to receive significant institutional backing

from either the American Government or the private sector. In contrast, the State Department warmly embraced Martha Graham's more traditional variety of modern dance and sponsored her company in numerous world tours as early as 1955. Graham was seen as quintessentially American, while Cunningham was regarded for some years as working on the margins of American culture.

While the widespread excitement generated by the "historic" moment of the Legacy Tour may speak to the security of Cunningham's place in dance history, his work is still widely seen as oblique. Alistair Macaulay offers evidence in his description of the audience's behavior during a Cunningham performance at Stanford University in 2009: "members of the audience fidgeted, a few walked out, and some of those who remained were evidently astonished by the ovation that followed."³ He concludes: "Cunningham choreography remains controversial."⁴ Yet, Cunningham's work was already identified as "historic" and iconic in 1968; one critic wrote: "Whereas his former fame was confused with controversy associated with problems of the avant-garde, he now is generally recognized as one of the most important influential talents in the contemporary dance world."⁵ It is curious to note that a choreographer can be understood as both controversial and an established "master," as Acocella suggests.

In November of 2011, my own experience of viewing the company in its Legacy Tour performance of *Roaratorio* (originally performed in 1983, fig. i.1) reflected the challenge posed by Cunningham's revolutionary aesthetic. As in all of Cunningham's dances the music and dance are detached; both reflect a radical notion of what constitutes their art. Most problematic perhaps is Cage's experimental score, which might be more fittingly described as a collection of diverse

³Alastair Macaulay, "The Cunningham Countdown: A Day for Merce in Chicago." *The New York Times*, November 17, 2011.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵Suzanne Fields, "The Cunningham Aesthetic." *The Washington Star: Sunday Magazine*. February 22, 1970.

(and occasionally for some, unpleasant) sounds. The hour-long dance is story-less, but traces of a theme or experimental thread can be found both in the score (in Cage's reading of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, for example) as in the choreography, which features the sporadic incorporation of Irish jigs and reels, made modern when absorbed by Cunningham's distinct style of clarity and line. In Cunningham, beauty appears in the guise of the poetic accident: of the unexpected collision of sound and movement or the inexplicable resonance of the tiniest gesture, for example. Making sense of one's relationship to this new situation takes time; numerous ideas are at work.

Throughout the sixty-minute performance of *Roaratorio*, my sister stole hidden glimpses at her cell phone while other audience members shuffled, yawned, coughed, and whispered to their neighbors. Friends and family who experienced the performance focused on two elements in particular: the amazing skill and strength of the Cunningham dancers and the unpleasantness of John Cage's score, which featured traditional Irish music, hundreds of seemingly incongruous sounds (glass breaking, babies crying, etc.), and a recording of Cage reading James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939). In an effort to make sense of the work, my mother asserted that it seemed to be a kind of "conceptual dance" that mirrored early twentieth century projects in the visual arts.

As contemporary audiences continue to suggest, Cunningham's work presented a tension between the technical virtuosity of the dancing and his new definition of the very notion of what constitutes dance. In *Roaratorio*, for example, a movement of total body exertion, such as a sequence of jumps with complicated footwork, might be followed by the equally valued, but remarkably simple relocation of a stool from one side of the stage to another. Cunningham's aesthetic also re-imagined the interaction among music, dance and décor, and frequently

presented parallel experiments in the realms of music and the visual arts. Accounts of Cunningham as conceptually puzzling often allude to the ways in which his dances offered a radical rethinking of the relationship among creator, performer, and audience. Why and how, then, did he become one of America's most celebrated choreographers?

In understanding Cunningham's unlikely achievement, we might characterize both his company's rise to American institutionalism as well as his ambiguous legacy as exemplifications of the "accidental icon." I will use this term to indicate Cunningham's association with a group of marginal artists whose aesthetic affinity helped him develop a kind of accidental relationship to mainstream culture. Within the context of the Cold War, and specifically, the social revolutions of the 1960s, Cunningham was seen as a kind of "exemplary radical," and embraced as a symbol of American freedom. Understanding Cunningham as the "accidental icon" suggests four defining aspects of Cunningham's history which will provide the focus of this essay, namely, the complexity of the challenge posed by his aesthetic, his alternative network of supporters, the contemporary critical discourse that framed Cunningham as the "New America," and finally, Cunningham's unconventional funding mechanisms. In other words, my thesis seeks to understand the uniqueness of circumstances that enabled Cunningham to become, in some sense, "iconic."

As we will see, the notion of Cunningham as an "accidental icon" is robustly visible in comparison to Martha Graham (1894-1991). Although both Graham and Cunningham might be considered American cultural icons, they came to hold this status in very different ways. Aesthetically, Cunningham's work offered a dramatic departure from Graham's deeply emotional, narrative-driven dances, which were characterized by earthly, turbulent gestures, and captured by the pervasive photographs of Barbara Morgan (fig. i.2). In contrast, Cunningham's

dances were emotionally ambiguous, non-narrative, and decidedly more upright. These qualities are evident in *Second Hand* (fig. i.3), for example, in which the dancers appear to glide across the stage with backs erect in Cunningham's signature triplet step. Each movement seems energetically lifted, yet firmly grounded in the balance provided by Cunningham's crisp technique. Given the absence of drama, emotion and fixed meaning, we savor the expressive simplicity of each individual movement in *Second Hand*, as we might in every Cunningham dance. In these and other ways, Cunningham's choreography proposed a fundamental challenge to the entire system of meaning in which Graham was operating.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Martha Graham was a towering figure and the established icon of American modern dance. In subverting her model, Cunningham was forced to cultivate an alternative system of production and network of patrons. As I have mentioned, the U.S. State Department was unresponsive to Cunningham's early requests for funding. The government's decision to deny Cunningham's applications had much to do with the politics of the "Dance Panel," the committee that was responsible for selecting which dance companies the government would sponsor abroad. The Panel was constituted in 1954 in the earliest stages of the government's Cultural Presentations Program and composed of the perceived "experts" in the field of dance: in other words, the "dance establishment." Cunningham was also disconnected from prominent wealthy figures such as Graham's loyal supporter, Bethsabee de Rothschild (1914-1999), who was a founding member of the Dance Panel and in charge of a number of American dance festivals and organizations. By contrast, Cunningham built a precarious network of support through the community of avant-garde visual artists that surrounded him, including, most notably, Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) and Jasper Johns (b. 1930). Much of Cunningham's legitimization came from his association with these artists, whose experiments in

chance and efforts to redefine what constituted painting, ran parallel to Cunningham's own aesthetic experiments.

Given this marginal, alternative network of patronage and his radical aesthetic, Cunningham presented an unlikely case for achieving a significant level of cultural legibility and impact in the 1950s. Nevertheless, over the course of the twentieth century, and particularly the 1960s, his project was gradually and increasingly embraced by artists, dancers and musicians; it has carved out a notable, and even unique, place for itself in art history. In this paper, I will begin by exploring Cunningham's accidental iconicity through a study of the history of his company, with particular attention to the development of his aesthetic. I will then provide an analysis of Cunningham's networks, highlighting his centrality within a community of experimental artists across disciplines. The third chapter will illustrate the critical framework that defined the terms of Cunningham's "establishment" and the ways in which Cunningham was gradually understood as the "New America." Finally, I will illustrate the ways in which these unusual circumstances were played out in Cunningham's alternative system of patronage.

By 1968, Cunningham was understood as an American institution. Perceived as central to the genealogy of American modernism and providing a significant basis for postmodernism, his aesthetic experiments secured his legacy. Institutional patronage followed, supporting Cunningham's experiments in choreography consistently by the early 1970s. Almost half a century later, Cunningham's legacy was reinforced by the elegiac writing of *New York Times* dance critic, Alistair Macaulay, in his review of the Cunningham company's final performances:

The diversity that each of these dancers showed in just 50 minutes was more than most dancers show in a lifetime. It was the diversity of Cunningham dance theater. If we had decades left of this company, we could not exhaust its range or solve all the mysteries of

its repertory. The old stage motto goes, “Leave them wanting more.” The Cunningham company leaves us on New Year’s Eve. Who can help wanting more?⁶

In preparing this thesis and attempting to understand Cunningham’s eccentric rise to becoming “iconic,” I have pursued a wide variety of resources. To begin, I attended several of the company’s Legacy Tour performances and experienced the momentous final “Events” at the Park Avenue Armory. My research took me to the Jerome Robbins Dance Collection of the New York Public Library, where I uncovered much of the criticism produced by specialized dance journals and magazines, and to the Special Collections division of the University of Arkansas Library, where I examined the material surrounding the U.S. State Department’s Cultural Presentations Program, focusing specifically on the discussions surrounding Cunningham’s applications for funding. I also traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where I looked at Cunningham’s original sets and costumes, both on view in the exhibition *Dance Works I: Merce Cunningham/Robert Rauschenberg*, and in the Museum’s permanent collection storage. Finally, I spent time at the Cunningham studio in New York City’s West Village, where I conducted interviews of dancers and the company’s director, Robert Swinston. I also took a week of dance classes with several former Cunningham company members in attempt to understand the intricacies of Cunningham’s technique and style. Though it was written for the Art History Department, my thesis work—like Cunningham’s intermedia aesthetic—incorporates studies in music and dance and draws heavily on network analysis and cultural studies. In retracing Cunningham’s footsteps at his studio, in collaborations with visual artists, and in his applications for funding, I have tried as much as possible to reconstitute the elusive accidental icon.

⁶ Alistair Macaulay, “For Cunningham Dance Company, Contentment and Finality at Armory.” *New York Times*, December 30, 2011.

Chapter 1

Merce Cunningham: A Brief History

“For anyone who attended Cunningham performances over the years, some were among the toughest times ever spent in a theater. The music could be abrasive, the costumes peculiar, the choreography hard to absorb. No wonder people walked out in droves over the years. Many of us, however, are more than glad we stayed. The very difficulty of this kind of dance theater was intimately connected to its greatest rewards. Rhythm, line, balance, phrasing, drama, expression and aesthetics were all redefined, again and again. We had to chase to keep up. Along the way our lives were repeatedly changed by Cunningham’s dance poetry.”⁷

West Coast Years

Even from a young age, Mercier Philip Cunningham was a dancer; his interests diverged from those of his parents and two brothers who both followed their father into legal professions (his mother was a school teacher). As early as the age of ten, Cunningham studied tap, waltz, and other forms of vaudeville with a woman named Maude Barrett at her small local studio, The Barrett School of the Dance. Cunningham continued to study with Mrs. Barrett throughout high school and was frequently featured alongside her daughter, Marjorie Barrett in tango, “soft-shoe” routines, and character dances, and even went on a small performing tour throughout the West Coast before completing his senior year of high school. Cunningham would later attribute some of his twisting foot gestures in *Antic Meet* (1958) (fig. 1.1) to Marjorie Barrett’s lessons.⁸

After graduating from high school in 1936, Cunningham spent a year studying at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., but returned to the west coast to pursue dance and theater at the Cornish School in Seattle, Washington (now the Cornish College of the Arts). His parents, “remarkable for a small-town couple at the time,” wanted Cunningham to pursue his interest in the arts and supported him in this decision.⁹ Within the Cornish School’s open, interdisciplinary environment, Cunningham studied theater (the methods of Stanislavsky), music,

⁷ Alistair Macaulay, “Hard to Grasp but Harder to Say Farewell.” *New York Times*, December 22, 2011.

⁸ David Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*. New York, NY: Aperture, 1997, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

art history, and dance. He was persuaded to concentrate on modern dance after studying Graham technique with an internationally renowned woman named Bonnie Bird, a former dancer in Graham's company in New York.¹⁰

Between 1937 and 1939, Cunningham became familiar with a broader network of artists who would eventually connect him to the modern dance and art communities in New York City. He saw performances of the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo (in February of 1939), the Humphrey-Weidman Company, and Lincoln Kirstein's Ballet Caravan, and even got a chance to meet Kirstein himself.¹¹ In the summer of 1938, Bonnie Bird invited Cunningham to join her at the summer dance program at Mills College in Oakland, California, where he studied and performed in dances by modern dance choreographer, Lester Horton (1906-1953).

That fall, after returning to the Cornish School, Cunningham met John Cage (1912-1992), the pianist who was hired to accompany Bonnie Bird's dance classes. Cage soon began teaching his own composition classes (including one specifically on composition for dance), which had a profound affect on Cunningham: "[Cage] simply made us make things—you had to think about it, not just have some feeling about what you were going to do next, but *think* about it, and that was an extraordinary experience."¹² Around this time, Cage was interested in composing for dance and in teaching dancers how to compose. He explored these and other more general questions about the relationship between music and dance in an article called "Goal: New Music, New Dance," published in Louis Horst's *Dance Observer* in 1939.¹³ The article calls for a "revolution" of modern music through experiments in percussive sound. "In short," Cage writes,

¹⁰ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 12-15.

¹¹ Kirstein reports that they met at the Cornish School in 1938. For more on Kirstein's account of his relationship with Cunningham see: Lincoln Kirstein, Essay in *Merce Cunningham*, edited by James Klosty, 89-90. New York: Saturday Review, 1975.

¹² Merce Cunningham quoted in Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 17.

¹³ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 17

“we must explore the materials of music. What we can’t do ourselves will be done by machines and electrical instruments which we will invent.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Cage suggests that these new possibilities in music afford equally important possibilities in the realm of choreography. The problem, he argues, is that the current music used in dance is “identical [...] but not cooperative with it.”¹⁵ For Cage, percussive sound provided a solution to this choreographic problem; it allowed the music and the dance to co-exist and work together.¹⁶ These ideas are at work in Cage’s *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*, composed in April of 1939, which features the piano, Chinese cymbal, and other electronic sounds.¹⁷ Cage’s biographer, Kenneth Silverman, suggests that *Landscape No. 1* was “perhaps the first electroacoustic music ever composed.”¹⁸ Cunningham, a student in Cage’s courses was absorbing these experimental ideas.

Cunningham returned to Mills College during the following summer in order to participate in the sixth session of the Bennington School of Dance. The celebrity group of participating choreographers included Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. According to David Vaughan, Graham was tipped off about Cunningham’s technical skill when a friend, Ethel Butler (who was substitute teaching for Graham at the time), called and described Cunningham as “the most magnificent creator of a man [she had] ever seen.”¹⁹ Butler urged: “grab this man before anyone else does.”²⁰ Indeed, on the basis of Cunningham’s performance in classes and in the final summer concert at Mills, the choreographers showered him with offers: a place in the Humphrey-Weidman Company, a scholarship to Bennington College, and by

¹⁴ John Cage, *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961, 87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* also served as the score for one of Bonnie Bird’s dances. See: Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 19.

¹⁸ Kenneth Silverman, *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, 29.

¹⁹ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

personal invitation, a soloist role in Martha Graham's company. By September of that year, Cunningham was in New York City, rehearsing alongside Martha Graham and her only other male dancer, Erick Hawkins.

Dancing with Martha Graham

By the 1940s, Martha Graham was *the* undisputed leader in modern American dance. In joining her company, Cunningham placed himself at the center of the dance world establishment and aligned himself with ideas of performance that he would soon find disappointing. As she had promised, Graham gave Cunningham leading roles in her dances from the day he arrived at her studio. In December of his first season he performed a new dance, *Every Soul Is a Circus*, a trio, alongside Graham and Hawkins. During the company's 1940 summer residency at Bennington College School of the Arts in Vermont, he performed in two additional new dances: *El Penitente* and *Letter to the World*. Edwin Denby (1903-1983), who saw both dances performed in the spring of 1941 wrote, "Cunningham, the least finished dancer of the three, delighted me by his humor, his buoyancy, and his wholeness of movement [...] the empty lightness of his upheld arms when he leaps I have never seen elsewhere."²¹ In a performance later that year, Denby, once again, singled out Cunningham, naming him "one of the finest dancers in America."²²

The following year, Graham encouraged Cunningham to take classes at the School of American Ballet under Lincoln Kirstein, which he gladly did.²³ Graham's advice was perhaps reflective of a growing "blurring of distinctions between the modern dance and the ballet [...]" a

²¹ Edwin Denby, *Dance Writings*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 55.

²² Denby quoted in Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 23.

²³ When Kirstein asked Cunningham why he wanted to study at the School of American Ballet, Cunningham told him that he simply "liked *dancing*" suggesting that he was interested in studying dance regardless of style or school. See Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 23.

[new] erosion of boundaries”²⁴ which would have an impact on the development of Cunningham’s aesthetic.

In his third year in New York, Cunningham was still performing with Graham, but was beginning to doubt his commitment to her aesthetic approach:

I began to fear that Graham work was not in lots of ways sufficient for me. I suppose it came about from looking at other dancing and being involved with the ballet—something about the air, and the way she thought about dancing. So I began to do this thing I do of giving myself a class every day, and trying to experiment and push further.²⁵

It is interesting to note that it was, in part, Cunningham’s experience studying ballet that made him aware of his dissatisfaction with Graham. Was he inspired by Balanchine’s innovative choreography at the School of American Ballet? As noted in Chapter Two, Cunningham was looking for an environment in which to “experiment” and ask questions. The Graham studio, he was realizing, was not this kind of environment.

At the same moment, in 1942, John Cage arrived in New York with his wife Xenia Cage, whom he had married in 1935. The couple was staying temporarily at the home of Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst, whom they had met (earlier in 1942) while living in Chicago. Peggy supported Cage, introducing him to friends (potential patrons) and inviting him to give a concert at her “Art of This Century” gallery.²⁶ When she learned that Cage was also planning to give a concert at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943, she was outraged and subsequently made it clear that Cage and Xenia would not be welcome to stay at her home for much longer.²⁷ Though her precise reasoning is unclear, it seems likely that Peggy took Cage’s actions (agreeing to perform at a second opening) as a sign that he was not appreciative of her support. With very few

²⁴ Sali Ann Kriegsman, *Modern Dance in America: The Bennington Years*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 20.

²⁵ Merce Cunningham quoted in: Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 26.

²⁶ Silverman, 53 and Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant Garde*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1976, 95.

²⁷ Tomkins, 95.

options, Cage found a place to stay at the home of dancer Jean Erdman who was, at that time, collaborating on choreography with Cunningham at Bennington College in Vermont.²⁸ While Cage was staying with Erdman, he and Cunningham reconnected and before long, Cage began composing music for and collaborating with Cunningham.

Meanwhile, Cunningham's dissatisfaction over Graham's variety of modern dance was escalating. In a 1977 interview with Jacqueline Lesschaeve, he reflected: "I understood what Martha Graham was about. I could see it. The gravity. I thought the way she moved was very beautiful. Even when I was first there, I thought she was amazing, but I didn't think the rest of it was interesting at all."²⁹ In addition to being bored by Graham's aesthetic, Cunningham complained that he had trouble discussing his concerns and ideas with anyone at the studio: "It was difficult for me at that time – probably still is – to talk with dancers [...] I also wanted to talk about ideas and there wasn't anybody I could talk with, except John. I couldn't talk with dancers. Graham's dancers all thought she was marvelous and if I said anything against her work, that was the end."³⁰ This statement reveals Cunningham's desire for a different kind of aesthetic and environment; he wanted to test out ideas, to experiment, as did John Cage.

Cunningham began spending more time on independent work and in 1942, following Cage's suggestion, he gave experimental group concerts with two other disenchanted Graham dancers, Nina Fonaroff and Jean Erdman, at the Bennington College Theater (Martha Graham's company was in residence there at the time).³¹ Born in Los Angeles, Cage dropped out of Pomona College in 1930 in order to become a writer. After dabbling in writing and studies in

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance: Merce Cunningham in Conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve*. New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1985, 43

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 26. Cage joined the dancers at Bennington College that summer.

contemporary art, Cage decided to pursue his interest in music. He studied first, with the pianist Richard Buhlig and traveled in 1933 to New York to study with Adolph Weiss, a student of Arnold Schonberg's. Once he developed his skills in music composition, Cage returned to California to study for two years with Schoenberg himself.³² Since arriving in New York in 1942, Cage had been moving through the worlds of art, dance, and music, attempting to generate interest in his experimental compositions. Around the time of the 1942 concert at Bennington College, Cunningham's collaborations with Cage "confirmed [his] dissatisfaction with [Graham's] psychological and literary themes, and suggested alternatives to the use of music as a determinant in choreographic structure."³³ In other words, Cunningham was embracing the call to choreographers, that was articulated by Cage in "Goal: New Music, New Dance" in 1939. Thus, Cunningham was interested in creating dances in which music and choreography provided an equal and shared impact on the artistic outcome. This summer marked the beginning of their long-lasting artistic connection, which was founded on the embrace of collaborative experimentation and the exchange of ideas about dance, music, and visual art.

Between 1943 and 1945 Cunningham continued to dance with Graham while simultaneously pursuing his own experiments with Cage. The gulf between two dance forms began to grow. They held their first joint recital at the Humphrey-Weidman studio theater in New York in 1944. Denby, one of the few critics in the audience, praised Cunningham's performance: "the perfection with which he can indicate the rise and fall of an impulse gives one an aesthetic pleasure of exceptional delicacy. His compositions too were in no way derivative in

³² For a comprehensive biography of Cage see: Kenneth Silverman, *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage*.

³³ Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003, 355.

their formal aspect, or in their gesture; they looked free and definite at the same time.”³⁴ Denby’s attention to the experiments of Cage and Cunningham runs parallel to his essays on meaning and dance. Between 1941 and the mid-1950s Denby expressed his dissatisfaction with the status quo. Thus, in 1944, when he went to see Cage and Cunningham perform, Denby was looking for a new American dance, one that would (like the billboard photographs of his roommate, Rudy Burckhardt) embrace vernacular culture.

Part of the apparent “freedom” Denby recognized in the 1944 performance had to do with Cage and Cunningham’s radically new understanding of the relationship between music and dance. In *Root of an Unfocus* (fig. 1.2), for example, the dance “was divided into time units, and the dance and the music would come together at the beginning and the end of each unit, but in between they would be independent of each other. This was the beginning of the idea that music and dance could be dissociated.”³⁵ These experiments opened up enormous possibility for Cunningham and would become the basis of his radical aesthetic for the rest of his life. Reflecting on this new relationship between dance and movement Cunningham wrote: “From the beginning, working in this manner gave me a feeling of freedom for the dance, not a dependence upon the note-by-note procedure with which I had been used to working. I had a clear sense of both clarity and interdependence between the dance and the music.”³⁶ Was this the kind of revolution in dance that Denby was looking for? In addition to *Root of an Unfocus*, the 1944 performance included *Tossed at It Is Untroubled*, *The Unavailable Memory of...*, *Totem*

³⁴ Edwin Denby, *Dance Writings*, 117.

³⁵ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 245.

³⁶ Merce Cunningham quoted in David Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 276.

Ancestor, and *Spontaneous Earth*. The evening stands out in Cunningham's history as a milestone. Cunningham, himself, has said: "I date my beginning from this concert."³⁷

In January 1945, Cunningham organized a second concert with Cage that was, once again, extremely well reviewed by Denby. In this review, however, Denby was much more transparent about his intentions: "The kind of elastic physical rhythm [Cunningham] has strikes me as something peculiarly American, and it is delicately supported by the elastic phrases of John Cage's music."³⁸ Thus, in Cunningham, Denby saw the possibility of a new American modern dance. Following that performance, Cunningham danced his last season at the National Theater with Martha Graham's company. At this point, he made a decision to move away from Graham's style of modern dance, and towards something much more aesthetically radical and complex.

In leaving Martha Graham's company, Cunningham solidified his relationship with John Cage, who led him to explore aesthetic questions about Zen Buddhism and indeterminacy and connected him to a network of experimental musicians and artists.³⁹ Following Cunningham's departure, he began teaching his own classes and traveling across the country to perform with Cage when bookings materialized. Money was tight and it was hard to generate attention. Cunningham reflects: "I would write fifty letters and get two engagements."⁴⁰ In 1947, Cunningham received a somewhat unlikely commission from Lincoln Kirstein who asked him to choreograph a dance for George Balanchine's recently formed company, Ballet Society. The group performed *The Seasons* in the Ziegfeld Theater with music by John Cage and sets by

³⁷ Merce Cunningham, *Changes: Notes on Choreography*, ed. Frances Starr. New York: Something Else, 1968.

³⁸ Edwin Denby, Essay in *Merce Cunningham*, edited by James Klosty, 213. New York: Saturday Review, 1975, 213.

³⁹ For Cage, an "indeterminate" act is chosen by chance or an act whose performed outcome is unknown. See: Cage, *Silence*, 35-40.

⁴⁰ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and The Dance*, 51.

sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), who had previously worked on the décor for many of Martha Graham's dances. Despite his ongoing radical experiments, Cunningham's notes for *The Seasons* "suggest that he wanted to make a proper ballet, in the traditional sense, out of *The Seasons*—that is, a work with a theme as well as a choreographic structure."⁴¹ Cunningham's collaboration with Noguchi underscored his ability to work in the "traditional" style of Martha Graham. From then on, however, he made the distinct choice to abandon that tradition.

Black Mountain College and Eighth Street

In April of 1948, following the Ballet Society performances, Cage and Cunningham (fig. 1.3) made a trip to Black Mountain College, the experimental liberal arts college in North Carolina, founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice and Theodore Dreier (former faculty members at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida). Cage heard about the college while teaching at the Cornish School in Seattle and had been in touch with the administration about the possibility of teaching there since 1943.⁴² Black Mountain was known for its interdisciplinary experimentalism and its renowned faculty, which included former Bauhaus artist Joseph Albers. Both Cage and Cunningham saw this as an ideal environment in which to pursue their experiments in composition of choreography and music. The success of Cunningham's first visit resulted in an extended invitation to return and teach (with Cage) during the summer of 1948. That summer, Cage and Cunningham were just two of many New York City transplants. As Jed Perl writes, it was the summer when "New York came to North Carolina, and the history of this small college became a piece of the story of avant-garde Manhattan."⁴³

⁴¹ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 40.

⁴² Martin B. Duberman, *Black Mountain; an Exploration in Community*. New York: Dutton, 1972, 277.

⁴³ Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century*. New York: Vintage, 2007, 225.

The 1948 Summer Institute at Black Mountain College fostered collaborations between John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Richard and Louise Lippold, Arthur Penn, and Mary Caroline (M.C.) Richards. Almost all of them were involved in performing Cage's big production of the summer, *Piège de Méduse*. Though this performance is frequently overshadowed by the mythic glory of the 1952 *Theater Piece*, *Piège de Méduse* exemplifies the collaborative spirit and theatrical spectacle that would draw quite a bit of attention four years later. Influenced by a mix of ideas from Dada/Surrealist artist, Marcel Duchamp, the French playwright and theorist, Antonin Artaud, and Eastern philosophy, Cage rallied the Black Mountain faculty to join in on his effort:

The translation was by M.C. Richards; it was directed by Arthur Penn, with sets by Willem de Kooning, assisted by his wife, Elaine; the play starred Buckminster Fuller as the Baron and Elaine de Kooning as his foster daughter or "*filles de lait*" Frisette; Merce Cunningham choreographed and danced the role of the monkey Jonas "stuffed by a master hand," whose tail was designed by Richard Lippold; Cage, of course, was at the piano.⁴⁴

The piece offered an inter-media spectacle through which Cage could explore ideas of music in relation to theater. At Black Mountain College, the faculty members thrived off each other's multidisciplinary work and ideas and were willing participants in Cage's experimental theater. Through the college's unique spirit of community, these artists became important staples of Cunningham's network. At the same time, they reflected the emergence of a new kind of community at Black Mountain College. As Mary Emma Harris concludes, the summer marked the end of the European artists' dominance at Black Mountain College, and the "emergence of the young Americans, who were to be the creative leaders in the arts in the United States for the

⁴⁴ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 19.

next twenty-five years.”⁴⁵ The buzz over Black Mountain College was just beginning to circulate in New York City, where artists were consumed by a similar sense of optimism and excitement.

Around this time, Manhattan’s vanguard painters had situated themselves between Eighth and Twelfth Streets and First through Sixth Avenues, in the heart of Greenwich Village.⁴⁶ This general area was home to their studios, cooperative galleries, and primary social gathering spaces, and thus, became the home of the avant-garde community during the 1940s and 50s. The chief members of this community were the Abstract Expressionists, including Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, and Willem de Kooning, among others. In the 1940s these artists were surrounded by a group of other artists and intellectuals who met regularly to discuss the future of American art at the Waldorf Cafeteria on Sixth Avenue and Eighth Street. In 1949, when the atmosphere at the Waldorf became dangerous, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Ad Reinhardt, Jack Tworkov and their friends organized “The Club” (which was also know as the “Artists’ Club” or “Eighth Street Club”) on east Eighth Street, two doors down from Studio 35, an art school which had been founded one year earlier by Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko, among others.⁴⁷

These artists shared a New York neighborhood, but more importantly, they had a shared vision about American art. Their abstract canvases asserted a new, “all-over” understanding of the painting space and were indebted to a love of spontaneity and experiment, but also to the grand scale public art of the Mexican muralists. Promoted by the critical writing of Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) and Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978), Abstract Expressionism succeeded, in part, because of its resonance with post-war ideology. As we know from Serge Guilbaut, “This

⁴⁵ Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1987, 146.

⁴⁶ Irving Sandler, *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978, 30.

⁴⁷ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 34.

plastic style, in dialogue with European tradition, helped to forge a native image of American art that responded to the cultural needs of the new United States that emerged from World War II.”⁴⁸ In the 1950s, the visceral, non-representational canvases of the Abstract Expressionists were seen as emblems of the “New America.”

Within this context, the Artists’ Club was the most important site of intellectual exchange. At the time, Cunningham’s studio was only a few doors down on Eighth Street, making it easy for him and Cage to frequent the weekly events that took place on Wednesdays and Fridays.⁴⁹ Cage, who was perhaps more of a public figure within the Club, led several of his own talks. Morton Feldman recalls a series of two Cage lectures titled “Something” and “Nothing.” The “Lecture on Something,” Cage explained, was “a talk about something and naturally also a talk about nothing. About how something and nothing are not opposed to each other but need each other to keep on going.”⁵⁰ Even before the formation of the Artists’ Club, Cage had been involved with Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg, assisting in the production and editing of *Possibilities*, a new magazine of art and literature.⁵¹ But by the 1950s, with the formation of The Club, ideas were circulating in an even more centralized fashion. Cage and Cunningham were at the heart of New York’s avant-garde discourse.

Around this time, Cunningham taught a regular weekly class schedule in his small Eighth Street studio. Though his classes were small, he began attracting a consistent group of dancers; many of them were students of Graham’s. “By this time,” Cunningham reflects, “we weren’t any

⁴⁸ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983, 2.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 35.

⁵⁰ Perl, 74.

⁵¹ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 110.

longer thinking about metronomic speeds at all, simply lengths of time.”⁵² Firmly committed to separating music and dance based on the common denominator of time, both he and Cage began experimenting with the applications of chance to composition. Cunningham applied these experiments for the first time in *Sixteen Dances for Soloist and Company of Three* (1951), in which he determined the “individual sequences, the length of time, and the directions in space” by tossing a coin.⁵³ *Sixteen Dances* marks an important moment of transition for Cunningham. On the one hand, he was still interested in representing specific “permanent” emotional qualities (i.e. fear, tranquility, the erotic) through movement; however, on the other hand, he was asserting equal emphasis on the notion of impermanence via chance. As dancer Remy Charlip explained: “Mr. Cunningham’s arrangement of the sequence of dances was based on the conviction that it is possible for anything to follow anything else, and that the actual order of events can be chanced rather than chosen, the resultant experience being free and discovered, rather than bound and remembered.”⁵⁴ Both Cage and Cunningham saw chance as a means to transcend self-expression and to broaden creative possibilities in composition. Cunningham once claimed: “My use of chance methods [...] is a present mode of freeing my imagination from its own clichés and it is a marvelous adventure in attention.”⁵⁵ Chance operations would become the basis for Cunningham’s experiments (and enormous innovation) in movement and continuity for the rest of his life.

⁵² Merce Cunningham, *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, Bill T. Jones*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1998, 24.

⁵³ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 63.

⁵⁴ Remy Charlip, “Composing by Chance.” *Dance Magazine* (January 1954). Rpt. in *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time: Essays 1944-1992*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 40-43. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1992, 41.

⁵⁵ Merce Cunningham quoted by Anna Kisselgoff, “Merce Cunningham: The Maverick of Modern Dance.” *New York Times*, March 21, 1982.

With these revolutionary experiments in tow, Cunningham and Cage returned to Black Mountain College in the summer of 1952, where they helped to facilitate *Theater Piece*, the epic “collaborative non-collaboration” between John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Charles Olson, Robert Rauschenberg, M.C. Richards, and David Tudor.⁵⁶ The mythic glory of this piece lingers in the history of postmodern dance and performance art as the proto-typical “Happening” and the conflicting accounts of what the piece entailed speak to the sense of anarchy and confusion of the event. As Cunningham recalls:

The piece was forty-five minutes long and, as I remember, each of us had two segments of time within the forty-five to perform our activity. The audience was seated in the middle of the playing area, facing each other, the chairs were arranged on diagonals, and the spectators were unable to see directly everything that was happening. There was a dog which chased me around the space as I danced. Nothing was intended to be other than it was, a complexity of events that the spectators could deal with as each chose.⁵⁷

These happening-like experiments mark a continuation of the artists’ interest in chance and the freedoms created by indeterminate situations. This was a celebration of the order in disorder or, as Cage would later say, the possibility of creating “a purposeless, anarchic situation which nevertheless is made practical and functions.”⁵⁸ The “complexity of events” and embrace of the unintentional proposed by *Theater Piece* reflects Cunningham’s growing interest in Zen philosophy, which Cage had cultivated. Together they frequented the lectures on Zen Buddhism by Daisetz Suzuki—a cult figure with a large following among New York artists—at Columbia University and Orientalia, a Village bookstore that specialized in the religion, philosophy, and art of Asia.⁵⁹ Simultaneously, these Eastern ideas were influencing the ideas of Antonin Artaud and the artists of Eighth Street. Thus, *Theater Piece* embodied a mélange of ideas and asserted

⁵⁶ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 20.

⁵⁷ Cunningham quoted in Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 65.

⁵⁸ John Cage quoted in Duberman, 351.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 37.

Cunningham's growing centrality within the emerging discourse on indeterminacy and the "controlled accident."⁶⁰

By this time, the New York City and Black Mountain College communities were becoming entirely blurred; students and faculty moved fluidly between them. This exchange becomes clear in Mary Emma Harris' descriptions of that summer, in which she explains that Cage and Cunningham were joined by "Jack Tworikov and Franz Kline, who were known to the faculty and students through visits to the Cedar Tavern in New York, [and] taught painting in July and August."⁶¹ Indeed by 1952, many of the leaders in the visual art world had spent time at Black Mountain College, including Robert Motherwell (1945, 1951), Willem and Elaine de Kooning (1948) and Clement Greenberg (1950).

The summer of 1952 also marked the beginning of Cunningham's friendship with Robert Rauschenberg, who would become one of his most important collaborators over the course of the next ten years. Rauschenberg had been a student at Black Mountain College since 1949 and in 1952, he was consumed by his "white paintings," canvasses painted entirely in white. "I always thought of the white paintings as being not passive but very—well, hypersensitive," said Rauschenberg in 1963; "So that one could look at them and almost see how many people were in the room by the shadows cast, or what time of day it was."⁶² Thus, Rauschenberg's white paintings and involvement in *Theater Piece* were parallel endeavors. Like Cunningham, he was interested in an art that would embrace life's indeterminacy.

When the organizers of the Summer Institute at Black Mountain invited him to teach for six weeks in June of 1953, Cunningham returned with his radical experiments in chance as well

⁶⁰ Marilyn Vaughan Drown, "Merce Cunningham and Meaning: the Zen Connection." *Choreography and Dance* 4, no. 3, 17-28.

⁶¹ Harris, 226.

⁶² Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 203.

as seven dancers from his studio: Jo Anne Melsher, Marianne Preger, Remy Charlip, Carolyn Brown, Paul Taylor, Anita Dencks and Viola Farber. He supported their stay by not taking any form of payment for his residency. Over the course of those six weeks, Cunningham developed a small repertory of new dances; in August, the dancers performed *Suite by Chance*, *Banjo*, *Dime-a-Dance*, *Untitled Solo*, and *Septet*.⁶³ In *Dime-a-Dance* Cunningham prepared thirteen segments (a mix of solos, duets, trios) of which only seven were performed. The selected sequences (and the order in which they were performed) was dictated by an audience member who, after paying a dime, selected a card from a deck of cards, designating which of the various possible sequences would be performed.⁶⁴ *Septet* (fig. 1.4) was choreographed to the music of Erik Satie and divided into seven sections, each with its own distinct style. In one section, Cunningham danced alongside three women; with arms linked, the group moved slowly between various “*poses plastiques*,” reminiscent of Balanchine’s *Apollo* (1928).⁶⁵ The separation between music and dance became quite distinct with Satie’s more-traditional score. Cunningham recalled: “I remember musicians not objecting, but saying that the music and the dance relationship was odd because there would be an accent in the music, and there would be no accent in the dancing.”⁶⁶ In this way, *Septet*, announced Cunningham’s aesthetic of accident.

The summer of 1953 was in many ways the beginning of the end for Black Mountain College; it was the last time the institution hosted the Summer Institute of the Arts and the rest of the college survived for only three more years.⁶⁷ At the same time, that summer marked the formation of a cohesive group of dancers linked to Merce Cunningham. These were the informal beginnings of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.

⁶³ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 67.

⁶⁴ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 73.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶⁶ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 91.

⁶⁷ Crippled by financial trouble, Black Mountain was forced to close in March 1957.

Early Years: 1953-1963

Cunningham's difficulty in garnering attention and support between the years of 1953 and 1963 speaks to the immense challenge posed by the complexity of his radical aesthetic. In the fall of 1953, however, Cunningham was optimistic; he managed to solidify the formation of his company by booking an eight-performance run at the Theatre de Lys in New York.⁶⁸ Though the performances were well attended, Carolyn Brown concluded that they were "neither a great success nor a dismal failure."⁶⁹ Part of the reason the company was unable to gain ground was the fact that dance critics were not taking Cunningham's experiments seriously. Though booking a theater for eight performances was quite an accomplishment for a modern dance company in the 1950s, neither the *New York Times* nor the *New York Herald Tribune* critics felt the performances were compelling enough to merit review.⁷⁰ It would take Cunningham years of traveling around the country and touring abroad before he would receive the full attention of New York's dance critics.

Yet, despite the lack of critical attention, the season announced Cunningham's new aesthetic. *Collage*, which premiered at the Theatre de Lys, featured two distinct iterations of dance, set to the same experimental score by Pierre Schaeffer. Each segment (the first a solo, the second a group dance) was sharply different in style. As one critic noted, "The choreography, amusing in the solo part, was formless for the group and left no impression at all."⁷¹ By creating two distinct dances to the same score, Cunningham emphasized the disassociation between dance and music, thereby, asserting his experimental aesthetic. Less than ten years after leaving Martha Graham's company, Cunningham was overturning the underpinnings of her celebrated style.

⁶⁸ The theater was owned (and founded) by actress Lucille Lortel and her husband, Louis Schweitzer.

⁶⁹ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 95.

⁷⁰ It is unclear why Denby (of the *New York Herald Tribune*), a long time supporter of Cunningham, was not present.

⁷¹ Anatole Chujoy, "Merce Cunningham and Company." *Dance News* 26, no. 2 (February, 1954), 10.

Rejecting self-expression and narrative, and looking instead to experimental techniques in composition, Cunningham proposed a kind of dance that was about dance itself.

Through the 1950s and 1960s this aesthetic continued to be problematic for critics and audiences and the Cunningham troupe struggled to get bookings in New York's theaters. Many people—both in and outside of the dance world—were skeptical of the seriousness of Cunningham's work and had difficulty making sense of the movement and music. In the late 1950s, Cunningham and Cage attempted to cultivate an audience outside of New York City; they bought a Volkswagen Minibus and took as many dancers as were available and able to dance on small touring trips, appearing for the most part at colleges and universities that could afford to host the company for a short residency. Tours came up at the very last minute and were facilitated on very low budgets. As Carolyn Brown writes, “the existence of the company [during these years] was more often a matter of faith than fact.”⁷²

Around this time, Robert Rauschenberg was becoming more involved with the troupe, photographing rehearsals and designing sets and costumes when needed. In 1954 he constructed the décor for *Minutiae* (fig. 1.5). Cunningham provided him with very few guidelines or restrictions and revealed very little about his own intentions for the choreography. This level of interaction would serve as a model for Cunningham's subsequent non-collaborative collaborations with visual artists. Over the course of his career, he would continue to approach collaboration in this way, working with Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Tacita Dean, Liz Phillips, Roy Lichtenstein, Bruce Nauman, Ernesto Neto, among other contemporary artists. Furthermore, Cunningham's collaboration with Rauschenberg added another level of interaction and complexity to his ongoing experiments about the relationship between music and dance by

⁷² Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 141.

introducing the added element of the visual arts. In 1954, Rauschenberg was beginning to experiment in collage, incorporating every-day objects directly into the surface of his paintings. His freestanding set for *Minutiae* is one of Rauschenberg's earliest "Combine" paintings, and features a mix of materials and found objects including paint, fabric, wood, old photographs, metal, newspaper clippings, and a plastic mirror. Rauschenberg became increasingly famous for these "Combines:" poetic appropriations of trash and other found objects that blurred the distinction between art and life.

Despite his burgeoning collaborations, Cunningham struggled to maintain public appearances. Between 1955 and 1960, his performances were few and far between: Carolyn Brown reports that the company only held five performances in 1957 and approximately three performances in 1958.⁷³ Nonetheless, Cunningham was creating works that would eventually find an important place in the company's repertory. *Antic Meet*, for example, choreographed in 1958 with sets and costumes by Robert Rauschenberg (fig. 1.1; 1.6), has become emblematic of Cunningham's artistic humor and playful qualities. The dance is an absurdist series of vaudeville scenes that comically represent different styles of dancing. One of the movements, in which Cunningham wriggles around in a knit sweater with no neck hole, famously parodied the dancing of Martha Graham. In *Antic Meet*, the audience could not possibly have missed Cunningham's clear departure from the seriousness and intentionality of Graham's dances.

To add to Cunningham's difficulty, the U.S. State Department was consistently rejecting his applications for funding to tour abroad. Despite Cage's relentless efforts and personal appeals, the company's proposals were always shot down. Martha Graham and her company, however, were among the first to be awarded one of the State Department's grants for a tour in

⁷³ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 164-184.

Asia (1955) and were consistently offered government funding for their global tours through the 1950s and 60s. Similarly, George Balanchine's New York City Ballet was awarded an astonishing ten-year grant of \$6,765, 750 to fund their tours abroad.⁷⁴ These tours were administered by Cultural Presentations Program, for which a "panel of experts" was assembled to determine which artists would be chosen to represent American culture.⁷⁵ Despite these financial obstacles, however, Cage and Cunningham decided to take the company abroad independently.

First World Tour

The company's performances abroad in 1964 generated a huge amount of critical attention and excitement. International success put pressure on American institutions to recognize and support Cunningham's experiments; in this way, 1964 marked a major turning point in the company's history. The idea of the tour came about in part because of Cage, whose contacts in India and Japan were eager to host his and Cunningham's performances.⁷⁶ Raising the money for the rest of the tour was a complicated and difficult matter, which I will address in Chapter Four.

In June of 1964, a company of sixteen dancers and staff flew from New York to Paris. The first performances, in Strasbourg, France, were warmly received and, according to Vaughan, "received critical notice of the most serious kind."⁷⁷ From there the company flew to Venice for

⁷⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁵ I will look at Cunningham's applications to the Cultural Presentations Program in depth in Chapter Four.

⁷⁶ The invitation to India came from the family of Gita Sarabhai who Cage had met around 1945. Sarabhai asked Cage to teach her about Schonberg and Western music and in exchange, Cage asked that she teach him about Indian music. For more on this subject see: Silverman, 66-67; The invitation in Japan came from Toshi Ichihyanagi and Yoko Ono who were involved with the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo, Japan. For more on this subject see: Silverman, 182-185.

⁷⁷ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 138.

a single performance which highlighted Cunningham's collaborations with Robert Rauschenberg in *Antic Meet* (1958), *Summerspace* (1958), and *Story* (1963). The timing was orchestrated in part by Rauschenberg's gallerist, Leo Castelli (1907-1999), who strategized such that the Cunningham dancers performed on the day before the winner of Venice Biennale's international Grand Prize was chosen. Indeed for the first time in history, the Grand Prize in Painting went to an American, the so-called *enfant terrible* Robert Rauschenberg. Though it generated quite a bit of attention for the company, Rauschenberg's success and resulting flood of attention proved to be somewhat divisive during the rest of the world tour. On the one hand, it caused tension among Rauschenberg, Cunningham, and Cage. As Carolyn Brown has written, "The problem was not really stars, but egos. Bruised ones. Meanwhile, Bob, enthralled by his own project seemed oblivious to the tensions mounting daily."⁷⁸ On the other hand, in a more beneficial sense, Rauschenberg's success advantageously divided audiences: "The anti-Bob crowd booed and hissed and the pro-Bob crowd (a good number of Americans among them) cheered and stamped."⁷⁹ Thus, Rauschenberg's success at the Biennale surrounded the Cunningham dancers in a buzz of controversy and excitement that helped to put them on the map, so to speak. Together, Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg were seen as the rebellious Americans, their avant-garde experiments framed as symbolic of democratic freedom. One critic, for example, celebrated Cunningham's aesthetic as a "struggle between freedom and order" and "the total emancipation of dancing as independent art."⁸⁰

From Venice, the company traveled to Austria and Germany before returning to France for a series of performances in Paris. They continued the tour with an extended stay in London

⁷⁸ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 407.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁸⁰ Alexander Bland, "The Future Bursts In: Ballet." *The Observer*, August 2, 1964.

where Cunningham's dancers and choreography were wildly successful amongst audiences and critics. Alexander Bland, dance critic for London's *The Observer*, showered Cunningham with praise in several enthusiastic reviews. In one, titled "The Future Bursts In," Bland wrote: "Here is heartwarming proof that [dance] is an art with a future, opening up ranges of possibilities which stretch out of sight; it ought to be celebrated with champagne in every dancing academy in the land."⁸¹ As Lewis Lloyd remarks, the final performances in London "created the kind of European critical acclaim that turns American heads."⁸² Following the London performances, the American press was flooded with headlines that read: "U.S. Dancers Win Hearts in London: Merce Cunningham Troupe Conquers Conservatism"⁸³ and "London Likes American Dancers."⁸⁴ The British dance critic, Clive Barnes, wrote a series of special reviews on the London performance for the *New York Times*. He reported: "Merce Cunningham is an iconoclast and is welcome in an art that has always suffered from a surfeit of icons and a deficiency of iconoclasts."⁸⁵ The fact that London, a city known for its conservatism in dance, could embrace and support Cunningham's radical aesthetic before America, the self-proclaimed emblem of freedom of expression and the homeland of modern dance, was no doubt a source of embarrassment for American institutions. In this way, London's overwhelmingly positive response pushed the country to recognize the validity of Cunningham's experimental dance.

From London, the troupe continued on in high spirits to Sweden, Finland, Prague, Copenhagen, East Berlin, Warsaw, India, Thailand, and Japan. As Vaughan reported in a special *New York Times* feature, the response to their performances was mixed: the company received

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Lewis Lloyd, Essay in *Merce Cunningham*, edited by James Klosty, 47-53. New York: Saturday Review, 1975, 49.

⁸³ Clive Barnes, "U.S. Dancers Win Hearts in London: Merce Cunningham Troupe Conquers Conservatism." *New York Times*, Aug 3, 1964.

⁸⁴ Francis Mason, "London Likes American Dancers." *New York Times*, December 27, 1964.

⁸⁵ Barnes, "U.S. Dancers Win Hearts in London."

“regulation catcalls” in Venice and Paris and even a “small barrage of eggs and tomatoes;” India’s audiences, “among the best of all,” were “immediately responsive;” the aesthetic resonated in Japan, but generated only “polite interest” in India and Bangkok; lastly, in Prague, where the company was seen as “subversive,” they received an enthusiastic standing ovation.⁸⁶ Thus, over the course of the six-month tour, Cunningham was both celebrated and seen as controversial and cosmopolitan. Overall, the resounding response was that of London’s “knowledgeable critics,” who stamped Cunningham with their European seal of approval.

An American Company

The world tour marked a major turning point for Cunningham; it helped to solidify his place in the pantheon of history and his company’s status as an American institution. Upon their return to the United States, the company members received bits of long-awaited recognition from the American public. Bookings, funding, and criticism came gradually. In addition, as David Vaughan writes, the very nature and community of the company underwent a change following the tour:

The time when the dancers and artistic personnel could live together like a family was over. That situation, however, could not in any case last. The company was inevitably to become a bigger operation. There was no longer any doubt that it was a major dance company, and that in future years Cunningham’s work would have an enormous influence on contemporary dance.⁸⁷

The years of informal VW tours were in fact over, but Cunningham’s difficulties in establishing himself as an American institution were not. His “major dance company” would not find financial stability or major institutional support until 1968.

⁸⁶ David Vaughan, “Adventures on a World Tour.” *New York Times*, January 3, 1965.

⁸⁷ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 145.

For the rest of the twentieth century and up until his death, Cunningham continued to pursue new experiments in choreography. In the 1970s, for example, he began experimenting in film and video alongside Charles Atlas. These projects deepened Cunningham's ongoing re-interpretation of the stage space, created the possibility of new detailed views, and even proposed questions in movement. As Cunningham wrote in 1994: "Working with video and film gave me the opportunity to rethink certain technical elements. For example, the speed with which one catches an image on the television made me introduce into our class work different elements concerned with tempos which added a new dimension to our general class work behavior."⁸⁸ Atlas has continued these experiments and his collaboration with Cunningham on *Ocean* (choreographed in 1994; film completed in 2011) was featured in the 2012 Whitney Biennial (fig. 1.7). As Alistair Macaulay wrote, "The whole film keeps reminding you, as Cunningham wanted "Ocean" to show, that there are more views than one, that no single take can ever be definitive."⁸⁹ Thus, the medium of film afforded a continuation and expansion of Cunningham's early experiments by revisiting the notion of performance space and expanding its traditional, singular view.

Beginning in 1989, Cunningham's work in LifeForms (a joint project with the Dance and Science departments of Simon Fraser University in British Columbia) explored the use of computer programming in relation to choreography. For Cunningham, this too, was a way of expanding compositional choices: "it presents possibilities which were always there, as with photos, which often catch a figure in a shape our eye had never seen."⁹⁰ At the age of eighty, Cunningham employed this technology in choreographing *Biped* (1999; fig. 1.8), considered by

⁸⁸ Merce Cunningham, *Art Performs Life*, 20.

⁸⁹ Alistair Macaulay, "Films That Allow the Elusive to Elude." *New York Times*, April 9, 2012.

⁹⁰ Merce Cunningham, *Art Performs Life*, 21.

the *New York Times* to be, “the single most sensational dance choreographed by anyone in the 1990s.”⁹¹

We might understand Cunningham’s Legacy Plan as his final experiment in the history of dance. The grand-scale operation draws attention to his diverse repertoire and lifetime of experimental ideas, but also raises questions about how Cunningham himself will be remembered in the absence of his company. How does the aesthetic of accident retain a legacy and how does that legacy survive without a company? As the moment of the company’s closure has demonstrated, Merce Cunningham is widely understood as one of the most important choreographers of the twentieth century; yet for many, his aesthetic is still problematic or incomprehensible. We can use this framework to understand how Cunningham’s ascendancy was based on his collaborations and network building and the growing critical understanding of his aesthetic; these factors magnified Cunningham’s experiment and reveal that he was the lucky recipient of good timing. Indeed, as we will see, he was the “Accidental Icon.”

⁹¹ Alistair Macaulay, “Merce Cunningham, Dance Visionary, Dies.” *New York Times*, July 27, 2009.

Chapter 2

The Alternative Academy: Building Cunningham's Networks

An anonymous photograph from 1964 (fig. 2.1) depicts the sixteen traveling members of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as they board the airplane that will take them from New York to Paris, the first city to host the company during its first world tour. The photograph features (from left to right) Shareen Blair, David Tudor, Alex Hay, Robert Rauschenberg, Mrs. Gray (an English nanny hired by one of the dancers), Bill Davis, Deborah Hay, Barbara Lloyd, Steve Paxton, Lewis Lloyd, and Merce Cunningham, and on the steps (from the top), Carolyn Brown, David Vaughan, Viola Farber, John Cage, Sandra Neels, and Albert Reid. Though many are not well known, these names reflect the key players and communities that came together to support Cunningham in the 1950s. David Tudor's presence, for example, reflects Cunningham's connection to the world of avant-garde musicians, whereas Robert Rauschenberg's speaks to Cunningham's network of avant-garde painters. The names of dancers Alex and Deborah Hay and Steve Paxton recall Cunningham's relationship to the (recently formed) Judson Dance Theater and the generation of post-modern dance that emerged from Cunningham's studio at the Living Theater in the early 1960s. Finally, the names of administrators David Vaughan and Lewis Lloyd suggest the growing formality of Cunningham's troupe, and the flexibility of a budget that could support the assistance of two administrative employees.

While the photograph offers several clues about the nature of Cunningham's community in 1964, it raises questions about how that community came to be and why it matters. How did Cunningham, who knew absolutely no one when he arrived in New York City in 1938, come to be one of the most original figures in New York City and at the heart of its avant-garde community? What did this community of artists exemplify artistically? Finally, what did being a

part of this community mean in the world of New York arts and culture? This chapter will attempt to describe exactly how Cunningham cultivated this network, while addressing these and other questions. As we will see, Cunningham's community differed dramatically from the networks of modern dance "establishment" figures such as Martha Graham, whose extended network controlled the ANTA Dance Panel (more detail below), which had the power to award large sums of government funding to American dance companies. In order to understand why Cunningham's company received no funding from the government in 1964 (over ten years after its first New York City season), we must first understand the players and relationships involved in these decisions. This chapter will lay the groundwork for understanding how Cunningham's funding played out in the first twenty years of the company's history.⁹²

When the modern dance "establishment" disapproved of his experiments, Cunningham cultivated an alternative community and network of support based on aesthetic affinity, but also on ambition. By 1964, we get a clear picture of what this community looked like. Cunningham's circle of dancers, musicians, and artists reflects his involvement in a kind of marginal, alternative academy, which he developed alongside John Cage in the early 1950s, by becoming a central to the art activity in New York's Greenwich Village.

Martha Graham and the Modern Dance Establishment

As Joseph Mazo has written, "Graham is to modern dance what Queen Victoria was to the royalty of Europe: Everybody's grandma."⁹³ Indeed, Martha Graham's studio was the nexus of the modern dance community and served as Cunningham's first home and network in New York City. While studying with Graham, Cunningham became familiar with New York's key

⁹² This will be the subject of Chapter Four.

⁹³ Joseph Mazo, *Prime Movers: The Makers of Modern Dance in America*. New York: Morrow, 154.

institutions in dance, taking classes with Lincoln Kirstein at the School of American Ballet (circa 1942) and participating in summer residencies at Bennington College in Vermont (in 1942 and 1943).⁹⁴ In his early years, Cunningham followed in Graham's footsteps, connecting with the "who's who" in the dance world, "networking," so to speak, with ballet circles (with Kirstein, for example) and the modern dance community (e.g. through his involvement at Bennington College). Around this time, modern dancers and choreographers composed a relatively small community that was still very much connected to the slightly more established (and better funded) ballet community. Choreographers in both ballet and modern dance, however, were struggling to define a dance idiom that was uniquely American and that would help to assert America as Europe's equal in the arts. In 1945, Cunningham severed his ties to Graham, and pursued work in an entirely different direction, away from the deeply grounded, dramatic gesture and emotionalism of Graham and towards the experiments in time, chance, and movement inspired by his relationship with Cage.

In one of Cunningham's earliest independent performances (1944) he appeared alongside Cage at the Humphrey-Weidman Studio Theatre on West 16th Street in New York. Like Graham, both Doris Humphrey (1895-1958) and Charles Weidman (1901-1975) emerged from the Denishawn School and belonged to the same circle of major players in the early days of modern dance, circa the 1940s and 50s.⁹⁵ At this point, Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, and José Limón (Humphrey's protégé) were the major disciples of the American modern dance world. Doris Humphrey was, for many years, a member of the exclusive Dance Panel (the group of "experts" hired by the government to decide which modern dance companies to sponsor abroad).

⁹⁴ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 23

⁹⁵ 'Denishawn' was a modern dance school and company founded in 1915 by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn in Los Angeles, California.

Graham was the panel's favorite and was understood by the government as being "at the forefront of the American modern dance movement."⁹⁶ In 1955, Graham and her company were among the first to be awarded one of the State Department's grants for a tour in Asia and were consistently offered government funding for their global tours through the 1950s and 60s. Similarly, José Limón's company was the first to receive funding through the Cultural Presentations Program in 1954.⁹⁷ He continued to receive funding from the Program in 1957 and 1960.⁹⁸ Each of these choreographers held senior authority at both the Bennington College and Connecticut College Summer Dance programs, which were the central places of gathering and sharing work for modern dance companies outside of the various New York City studios.

As is evidenced by his performance in the Humphrey-Weidman studio and his participation in Bennington College Residencies, there was a place for Cunningham within this community in 1944, despite the fact that his experiments were still described as "far-out." By the late 1950s however, things were vastly different; Cunningham was cast to the margins of the modern dance community. When, in the summer of 1962, for example, he was refused equal performance time with Graham and Limón at the Connecticut College Summer Program, he was essentially forced out of participating. Commenting on the misfortune, dance critic Jill Johnston wrote:

The exclusion of Cunningham this summer, [...] despite the facts that Limón is a charter member of the whole affair and that Graham is almost a national monument, is a sad reminder of how impossible it is at any moment in a history of anything for certain (controlling) groups of people to see where a thing is going, to put their fingers on the heartbeat of a movement.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 46.

⁹⁷ Limón was funded through the first iteration of the Cultural Presentation's Program, President Eisenhower's Emergency Fund. I will explain the history of this program in more detail in Chapter Four. For additional information see: Prevots, *Dance for Export*.

⁹⁸ Group II, Manuscript Collection 468, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

⁹⁹ Jill Johnson, "Dance: New London," *The Village Voice*, August 20, 1962.

As Johnston points out, Cunningham's experiments were the unacknowledged "heartbeat" of modern dance. Unfortunately, the establishment figures, namely, Graham and Limón, excluded him from the most important gathering of modern dance performers: the anniversary performances at the Connecticut College Summer Program. Johnston hints at the power dynamics at play, suggesting that this was in part an attempt by Graham and Limón to "control" the established center of modern dance. It seems likely that the dance establishment was feeling threatened by Cunningham's radical rejection of their aesthetic.

The politics of Cunningham's rejection of the Graham/Humphrey/Limón aesthetic and community had already affected him and would continue to do so during his applications for State Department funding. In 1954, the U.S. State department hired the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) to establish Advisory Panels in Music, Dance and Drama that would administer the government's Cultural Presentations Program. Each panel was comprised of "experts" in the respective fields and was responsible for deciding which performing art groups to send abroad with the help of government funding.¹⁰⁰ Though Cunningham was acquainted with a couple of the selected "experts," the panel comprised a group of establishment figures with whom he, for the most part, did not interact. When evaluating modern dance in the 1950s, this group leaned heavily in favor of the establishment projects of Graham, Humphrey, and Limón.

For many years, the Dance Panel's representatives were unwilling to vouch for Cunningham's experiments. Martha Hill (Director of the Dance Department at Juilliard School of Music), for example, was loyal to Graham and Limón; Doris Humphrey was, of course, undyingly loyal to her protégé, Limón; and Bethsabée de Rothschild (director of the Rothschild

¹⁰⁰ Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 37-52.

Foundation) was a longtime student and supporter of Graham, as was New York choreographer Agnes de Mille.¹⁰¹ Though Lincoln Kirstein (1907-1996) had a warm relationship with Cunningham in the 1940s—Cunningham had studied and offered classes at the School of American Ballet and Kirstein commissioned Cage and Cunningham to create a collaborative piece for Ballet Society in 1947—he too, was unwilling to support Cunningham’s State Department applications while serving as a member of the Dance Panel.¹⁰² In the summary of decisions made during the Dance Panel meeting on February 10, 1955, Kirstein is reported to have said that he “felt that the [Cunningham] company was boring” and thus, undeserving of government funding.¹⁰³ In an essay published in 1975, Kirstein elaborates on his thoughts on Cunningham: “If you want what I (finally) irreducibly think, and it will not please you, it is this. Without acrobatic virtuosity based on four centuries of logical exercises, a dancer cannot hope to attract the mass public that overlaps onto athletic events, ballgames of whatever category.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, Kirstein was primarily unsupportive of Cunningham on the basis that Cunningham’s anti-virtuosic aesthetic would not have “mass” appeal. Kirstein, almost a New York institution himself, wanted to put his money in artists with a secure legacy; in the 1950s, this meant George Balanchine and Martha Graham.

Though Cunningham’s dancers often came from the Humphrey-Weidman or Graham studios, the decision to work with Cunningham reflected a conscious allegiance or willingness to engage with his radical ideas, and an unspoken rejection of an older, and perhaps, outdated form of modern dance. But in the early 1950s very few people found Martha Graham to be outdated;

¹⁰¹ Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 147.

¹⁰² David Vaughan, "Merce Cunningham's 'The Seasons'" *Dance Chronicle* 18.2 (1995): 311.

¹⁰³ Meeting Minutes from the Dance Advisory Panel International Exchange Program: Feb 10, 1955, Group II, Manuscript Collection 468, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

¹⁰⁴ Lincoln Kirstein. Essay in *Merce Cunningham*, edited by James Klosty, 89-90. New York: Saturday Review, 1975, 89.

the dance world stood in awe of her domineering artistic presence and her revolutionary choreography. Graham was held up as the model and those, like Cunningham, who did not fit within the scope of her vision, were not taken seriously. In conservative 1950s America, Graham offered the comforts of the status quo: her aesthetic satisfied the universal love of narrative and appealed to the widespread desire for a distinctly American artistic vocabulary. This was also the case with the choreography of Limón. As Rebekah Kowal argues: “Because they fulfilled prescriptions for universalism, they were seen by members of the dance establishment as exemplary conveyers of ‘American’ artistic values.”¹⁰⁵

Cunningham’s Dancers

In many ways, the dancers who made up the Merce Cunningham Dance Company defined the Cunningham network and help to illustrate essential differences between the Graham and Cunningham communities. While Graham and Humphrey dancers were perhaps more likely to come out of conservatories or non-academic dance programs, Cunningham dancers frequently emerged from college or university settings. They display an intellectual engagement with Cunningham’s ideas, which is in many cases what drew them to Cunningham’s company in the first place. Before deciding to pursue a professional career in dance, for example, Carolyn Brown graduated from Wheaton College in 1950, Marianne Preger had a degree from New York University, and Viola Farber had studied at George Washington University and Black Mountain College.¹⁰⁶ This pattern still holds today; dancer Silas Riener, for example, has a degree in Comparative Literature and Creative Writing from Princeton University and both Emma

¹⁰⁵ Rebekah J. Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010, 189-90.

¹⁰⁶ Each of these dancers was a founding member.

Desjardins and Jamie Scott hold degrees from Barnard College/Columbia University. In a 2011 interview, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's Artistic Director (who assumed the role following Cunningham's death), Robert Swinston, recalled: "When I was in Cunningham [1980-2011], all of the dancers had been to college. Very few people went to conservatories."¹⁰⁷ In his book, *Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance*, Roger Copeland addresses this idea through an analysis of what he calls the "thinking body" in Cunningham. He acknowledges the fact that many Cunningham dancers are drawn to the work because of its "braininess" and argues that Cunningham's aesthetic gave new importance to the relationship between mind and body.¹⁰⁸ Just as this new aesthetic relationship attracted a new and specialized audience—one that was, as we will see, dominated by his extended network of artists, musicians, and other intellectuals—it also drew a specific kind of dancer. Their engagement in liberal arts communities outside of the Dance Academy suggests that they were not purely interested in the physical exercise of dancing; rather, they were more actively participating and engaging in Cunningham's ideas. In fact, many of the dancers who studied with him, including Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, and Lucinda Childs, went on to pursue their own conceptual experiments in dance. Thus, as we begin to see in the liberal arts backgrounds of his dancers, the spirit of Cunningham's community was one of experimental curiosity and engagement.

In contrast, Doris Humphrey articulated a decidedly anti-intellectual view of dancers: "The person drawn to dance as a profession is notoriously unintellectual. He thinks with his muscles; delights in expression with body, not words; finds analysis painful and boring."¹⁰⁹ Recall too, the Graham dancers' disinterest in engaging in discussion about dance with

¹⁰⁷ Robert Swinston, phone interview by Jennifer Harris. New York, (January 11, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ Roger Copeland. *Merce Cunningham: the Modernizing of Modern Dance*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Doris Humphrey. *The Art of Making Dances*. New York, Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1959, 17.

Cunningham, an issue that was essential to Cunningham's decision to leave her company. While the dance establishment communities maintained a hierarchical structure, in which the dancers simply carried out the prescribed instructions of their choreographers, Cunningham cultivated a new environment of communal exchange. This is perhaps what he was alluding to when he said: "We are dealing with a different idea about how people can exist together. How you can get along in life, so to speak, and do what you need to do, and at the same time not kick somebody else down in order to do it."¹¹⁰ Thus, the anti-authoritarian dynamic that Cunningham cultivated at his studio ran parallel to a suggested way of life. Indeed, this dynamic defined Cunningham's larger network, which we might characterize as "transactive," as opposed to hierarchical.

We might look to Carolyn Brown (b. 1927), for example, as someone who was both a dancer and a network builder. Brown performed with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company from 1952-1972 and actively participated in collaborations with Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg over the course of her twenty-year tenure.¹¹¹ In the early years of the company, she was married to Earle Brown (1926-2002) who was a key figure in Cage's circle of experimental musicians—this included Morton Feldman (1926-1987) and Christian Wolff (b. 1934)—who were composing works using magnetic tape in their Eighth Street Studio.¹¹² Through her husband, Brown was closely tied to this group and took part in conversations about their experiments. She recalls: "Some nights we'd crowd into M.C. [Richards] and David [Tudor's] sixth-floor walk-up [...] M.C. would cook kasha and bake whole-grain bread, and after dinner David would sometimes play—Stefan Wolpe, Pierre Boulez, Morton Feldman, John

¹¹⁰ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 164.

¹¹¹ For more, see information on Brown's experience with the company, see her memoir: Carolyn Brown, *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

¹¹² Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant Garde*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1976: 121.

Cage, and Earle Brown.”¹¹³ This group’s involvement on Eighth Street placed the musicians at the nexus of all kinds of experimental work in the arts during the 1940s and 1950s.

Understanding exactly who was there, at Eighth Street’s central gathering spots—mainly, Cedar Tavern and the Artists’ Club—provides a clear image of the close connections between the networks of musicians, visual artists, critics, dealers, and other art world figures, and the centrality of Cunningham within this community.

Carolyn Brown was perhaps even more helpful in providing Cunningham with a much needed but loose connection to the world of the dance establishment through her fifteen years of training with her mother, Marion Rice (1904-1955), a direct descendant of the Denishawn School, who remained a close friend of her mentor, Ted Shawn (1891-1972). Through this connection, Brown helped to secure an audition and subsequently, four performances and a commission for a new dance (*Nocturnes*) for the Cunningham troupe during the 1955 Jacobs Pillow Dance Festival (run by Shawn).¹¹⁴ Following the commission, the company’s touring season picked up a little bit with invitations from Bard College and the Japan Society.¹¹⁵ Thus, though Carolyn Brown was closely connected to Cage’s circle of musicians via her husband, she also benefited Cunningham’s network in ways that Cage could not: in this case, through her access to influential members of the modern dance community.

In the 1960s, Carolyn Brown had an affair with a man named James Klosty, who was introduced to the company by another Cunningham dancer named Sandra Neels (who had previously been involved with Klosty). Throughout the 1960s and 70s, Klosty traveled with the

¹¹³ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 89.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 118. The Jacob’s Pillow Dance Center, located in the Massachusetts Berkshires, was known for its annual summer dance festivals, the first of its kind in the United States. Ted Shawn and his wife, Ruth St. Denis, founded the center while the Denishawn Dance Company. This new form of modern dance became the basis for the next generation of modern choreographers including Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. For more on this subject see: Joseph Mazo, *Prime Movers: The Makers of Modern Dance in America*. New York: Morrow, 1977.

¹¹⁵ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 118.

company as its unofficial photographer, contributing prolifically to the visual record of Cunningham's tours and performances. His photographs were featured in numerous pieces of journalistic criticism as well as in the most widely used histories of the company, including Carolyn Brown's *Chance and Circumstance* and David Vaughan's *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*. Through his written and photographic documentation of the Cunningham Company, Klosty provides an inside perspective on the fabric of Cunningham's network and community during its early years.

In 1971, Klosty published an essay (under the pseudonym Michael Snell) on the misconceptions and general lack of critical reception of Cunningham's work.¹¹⁶ He also assembled a collection of writings and photographs on the company with contributions from Carolyn Brown, John Cage, Edwin Denby, Jasper Johns, Lincoln Kirstein, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Rauschenberg, Gordon Mumma, Earle Brown, Douglas Dunn, and Paul Taylor, among other artists, which was similarly compiled in response to the shortage of critical writing on Cunningham.¹¹⁷ By linking Cunningham to each of these figures, Klosty almost-propagandistically asserts a specific genealogy of ideas. From members of the "dance establishment" such as Edwin Denby and Lincoln Kirstein, to postmodern experimenters such as Yvonne Rainer, the group united in Klosty's collected essays, like the group depicted in the 1964 company photograph, announces Cunningham's centrality within multiple networks and multiple historical narratives. The book itself, a representation of this centrality, asserts the legacy of Cunningham's aesthetic as the foundation for Rainer's and Dunn's postmodern dance.¹¹⁸ As we

¹¹⁶ Michael Snell (pseud.), "Cunningham and the Critics." *Ballet Review* 3, no. 6 (1971).

¹¹⁷ Klosty, James. *Merce Cunningham*. New York: Saturday Review, 1975.

¹¹⁸ Yvonne Rainer was one of the founders of the Judson Dance Theater. Douglas Dunn moved between Rainer's and Cunningham's companies in the 1960s.

will see in Chapter Three, the critics *were* attempting to establish Cunningham's genealogy, albeit in a slightly different way.

Early New York Network

As noted earlier, Cunningham met Martha Graham at Mills College in the summer of 1939. Impressed by his artistic ability, Graham invited Cunningham to come dance in New York with her company. When Cunningham arrived in New York in the fall of 1939, he immediately went to her studio. "Oh, I didn't think you'd come," Graham said; Cunningham later reflected: "I didn't say anything, but I thought, 'You don't know me very well, lady.'"¹¹⁹ Part of what Graham did not understand about Cunningham was the fact that she was the only connection he had in New York and his main reason for coming. Through John Cage, who Cunningham had met at the Cornish School in Washington and with whom Cunningham would reconnect shortly (Cage arrived in New York in 1942), Cunningham's dependency on Graham would disappear completely. In fact, Cunningham would develop a network of friends and collaborators who would gradually replace his connections to the modern dance world.

During the early and mid 1940s, while the world was consumed by war and artists migrated from Paris to New York City, Cage exposed Cunningham to the world of modern art. In an interview with Jacqueline Lesschaeve, Cunningham recalled: "it was during the war period that I saw [...] the paintings of Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp and Piet Mondrian."¹²⁰ Though he insists that he "didn't have much to do with [these artists] in the sense of friendship," he adds, "sometimes I would go to parties at Peggy Guggenheim's where they would be [...] and there

¹¹⁹ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 22.

¹²⁰ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and The Dance*, 44.

were other artists who had come from abroad.”¹²¹ Cunningham first met Peggy Guggenheim through John Cage in 1942, when Peggy opened her “Art of This Century” gallery. She exhibited the work of European modernists (primarily Surrealism, Dada, and Cubism), but was also known for being one of the earliest gallerists to show the work of the Abstract Expressionists. Peggy’s New York apartment was an expanding treasure trove that featured her growing collection, including the work of Constantine Brancusi, Fernand Léger, Alberto Giacometti, Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Paul Klee, and Marc Chagall, among others. At the same time, her apartment was the center for salon-style social gatherings among modern artists and critics.¹²² Encouraged by Cage and by his exposure to the art world of Peggy Guggenheim, Cunningham began frequenting exhibitions and openings, simultaneously absorbing the aesthetics and ideas of these artists. The exposure was unlike anything he had experienced either back home or at Graham’s studio, and yet, he became very aware of the significance of the world he was witnessing:

I knew nothing about it. I’d seen very few paintings of any kind other than some reproductions in books, and so this was all totally new to me. But I began to realize who these people were in terms of art history, and I would listen and they would talk about their work, or somebody else’s work and the kind of talk was so different from anything I knew in the Graham world where talking was about technical things or what Martha might be doing or not doing.¹²³

Cunningham’s encounters with Peggy Guggenheim and the work of the modernist artists she championed shook up his idea of visual art and presented an aesthetic that veered in an entirely different direction from where modern dance was headed.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² For a study of the history and influence of Jewish women’s salons see: Bilski, Emily D. and Emily Braun. *Jewish Women and Their Salons*. New York: Jewish Museum, 2005.

¹²³ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 46.

As Cunningham was cultivating new relationships and conversations with these artists, he was also interacting with the emerging circle of avant-garde musicians surrounding Cage's experiments in this arena. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the key participants in what Alex Ross characterizes as the "laboratory atmosphere [that] developed in Cage's [New York City] apartment," were Christian Wolff (b. 1934), Earle Brown (1926-2002), Morton Feldman (1926-1987), and David Tudor (1926-1996).¹²⁴ In his own way, each of these musicians was interested in experiments in composition and technology.

Clearly Cage, Cunningham's life-partner since 1943, had the most profound affect on Cunningham's aesthetic over the course of his career.¹²⁵ For one, Cage was the major force behind Cunningham's early decision to separate the music from the dance and make them "coexist" based on the common denominator of time. As we have seen, the two attempted this for the first time in 1944, while giving a joint concert at the Humphrey-Weidman Studio in New York. Cage first became interested in composition for dance when he joined a modern dance company at UCLA. During this time, he "improvised at the piano during its technique classes and was soon composing percussion pieces for their dances."¹²⁶ When he arrived at the Cornish school in 1939 to accompany dance courses, he soon began teaching his own courses on musical composition for dance.¹²⁷ Within this context, Cunningham took part in Cage's first percussion orchestra.¹²⁸

Though much of the Cunningham literature focuses on Cage's impact on Cunningham's aesthetic in these and other arenas, the individual ideas of each of Cage's musician peers were

¹²⁴ Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise*. London: Harper, 2009, 368.

¹²⁵ Silverman, 61. Silverman suggests that their relationship became that of lovers some time around Cage's concert at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

¹²⁶ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 88.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 17.

also an important part of Cunningham's aesthetic equation. Hoping to collaborate and share experimental ideas, Cage encouraged Earle Brown (husband of Carolyn Brown) to come to New York and introduced him to the European avant-garde at the Darmstadt school in Germany. The two musicians engaged in similar compositional experiments, but while Cage emphasized chance in composition, Brown was more interested in questions of the performer's choice. Brown's open-form compositions allowed the musicians to play small sections, or "movable forms," of his pieces spontaneously and in any order during the performance.¹²⁹ In *Twenty Five Pages* (1953), for example, Brown provided anywhere from one to twenty-five performers with twenty-five pages of music and allowed each to play them in any given order (and to determine this order during the performance).¹³⁰

Similarly, composer Christian Wolff experimented with what he called "parliamentary participation," another approach to performer involvement in composition. As Michael Nyman explains, "Christian Wolff was evolving an indeterminacy in which all the decisions were to be made *during* performance, not by providing sound material to be realized on the spot (like Feldman and Brown) but by creating a chain of unpredictable situations which would only be brought about *through* the act of performing."¹³¹ This is essentially the case in Wolff's *Duo for Pianists II* (1958), in which the imprecise elements of the notation are left to the performers to interpret, based on their response to one another's compositional choices.

Morton Feldman's experiments in musical composition were most profoundly influenced by the Abstract Expressionists, and in particular, by the work of Philip Guston (1913-1980). Speaking of Jackson Pollock, Feldman wrote, "What resembled Pollock was my 'all over'

¹²⁹ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 71.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹³¹ Michael Nyman. *Music: Cage and beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 66-67.

approach to the time-canvas. Rather than the usual left-to-right passage across the page, the horizontal squares of the graph paper represented the tempo [...] and the vertical squares were the instrumentation of the composition.”¹³² At the same time, the Abstract Expressionist painters were able to find a kind of compositional equilibrium that was profoundly important for Feldman: “The degrees of stasis, found in a Rothko or a Guston, were perhaps the most significant elements that I brought to my music from painting.”¹³³ In an essay titled “Give My Regards to Eighth Street,” Feldman reminisces about spending time at The Artists’ Club (the center for avant-garde painting) in the 1950s: “there were two diametrically opposed points of view I had to cope with in those days – one represented by John Cage, the other by Philip Guston.”¹³⁴ Feldman understood Cage’s view as one that could be summed up by the sentiment that “Everything is music.” According to Feldman, Cage “gave up art to bring it together with society,” whereas Guston worked under the belief that “very little was art.”¹³⁵ Throughout his career, Feldman struggled to reconcile these two “points of view.” This is by no means surprising given that Cage was critiquing the notions of artistic subjectivity and intentionality that were such a crucial part of the Abstract Expressionist ethos. While Cage wanted to broaden the definition of music to include all sounds, the Abstract Expressionists had a very specific idea about what constituted painting. Like Cage, Cunningham was interested in broadening the definition of dance: “I started with the idea that first of all any kind of movement could be dancing.”¹³⁶

The fourth member of Cage’s circle, David Tudor, emerged as the most gifted performer to work through the notational challenges that arose from the ideas of Cage, Brown,

¹³² Morton Feldman and Walter Zimmerman, *Morton Feldman Essays*. Cologne, Germany: Beginner, 1985, 136.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 39.

Wolff, and Feldman. He realized many of Cage's complex experiments including *Music of Changes* (1951) and the infamous 4'33'' (1952). Tudor was on the faculty at Black Mountain College from 1951-1953 and also taught sporadically at the Darmstadt music school in Germany. Between 1953 and 1994 Tudor performed and composed for the Cunningham company more than any other musician (with the exception of John Cage). In 1960, *New York Times* music critic Harold Schonberg wrote a special feature on Tudor in *Harper's* naming him, "the world's outstanding piano specialist in music so arcane and rarefied that it leaves all other contemporary manifestations far behind."¹³⁷ Despite his renowned skill and music-world celebrity, Tudor spent much of his time assisting Cage and Cunningham in activities surrounding the company. As Brown writes, "Despite the many options open to him, David remained absolute in his loyalty to Merce. A remarkable tribute."¹³⁸

Each of these experimenters had an impact on Cunningham's aesthetic, and yet, when applied to dance, Cage's ideas about chance, Brown's "movable forms," and Wolff's "parliamentary participation," worked in different ways, providing a framework of related ideas that raised questions for Cunningham about how his dancers would participate in producing the choreography. In some cases, as with the 1956 dance, *Galaxy* (set to Earle Brown's open-form piece called *Four Systems*), Cunningham found that the complications involved in "open form" choreography were impractical, but as the following description by Carolyn Brown suggests, this was a decision he was willing to revisit:

Merce told Earle at the time that the reason he didn't allow us [the dancers] the freedoms that Earle specifies in *Four Systems* was that while musicians could respond spontaneously in performance without fear of bodily harm, dancers were in danger of crashing into each other, of being injured, or causing injury. Seven years later, in *Field*

¹³⁷ Harold C. Schonberg, "The Far-Out Pianist," *Harper's*, June 1960, 49-54.

¹³⁸ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 267.

Dances, he tried again, and this time he used the open-form concept more fully and granted the dancers the freedom to make spontaneous decisions in performance.¹³⁹

Thus, while Earle Brown's experiments (as well as the similar experiments of Christian Wolff) proved challenging when applied to dance, Cunningham was continually interested in the possibilities they presented choreographically. Finally, like Morton Feldman, Cunningham would also have to negotiate the surrounding influence of the Abstract Expressionists in relation to the anti-subjectivity ideas espoused by Cage.¹⁴⁰

Cunningham's engagement with each of these musicians' ideas mattered; they provided ways for him to think about non-narrative, indeterminate composition and opened up a whole range of new choreographic possibilities. Furthermore, they formed the basis of Cunningham's substantial network of musicians and would become loyal followers of Cunningham's work.¹⁴¹ Of his first joint concert with Cage, Cunningham recalls, "I do remember a number of painters coming and young composers, people interested in new possibilities."¹⁴² He continues, "very few dancers came," leading him to conclude that he was "doing something you weren't supposed to do."¹⁴³ Thus, by 1944, Cage and Cunningham had cultivated an audience that was already beginning to reflect the shift in Cunningham's community: from the dance establishment in which dance was itself conceived as a separate sphere, to the experimental avant-garde worlds of music and visual art in which dance was integral. The absence of dancers, particularly those of Martha Graham, announced the dance world's antagonistic consensus that Cunningham was defecting. At the same time, it signaled Cunningham's firm connection to a New York art scene that was not linked by genre or medium, but rather, by intermedial aesthetic affinity. This

¹³⁹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴⁰ I will discuss this encounter in more detail below.

¹⁴¹ In 1952 Morton Feldman lived in the same Lower East Side apartment building as David Tudor.

¹⁴² Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 45.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

became the basis for an unusual network, one that would provide Cunningham with an alternative to the controlling dance disciples of the Connecticut College Summer Program.

Black Mountain College and Eighth Street

Martha Graham and her modern dance network were becoming practically irrelevant for Cunningham. In the fall of 1952, the Black Mountain College contingent flooded the New York art scene. They became the defining members of a second generation of Eighth Street artists and intellectuals who, according to Irving Sandler, “came to New York [and] formed two loose groups: one frequented the Cedar Street Tavern [...]; the other gravitate[d] toward Cage and Cunningham.”¹⁴⁴ Suddenly, Cunningham was at the center of a community that was a world apart from Martha Graham’s studio. In the communities of Eighth Street and Black Mountain, he had no trouble finding people who would discuss aesthetic ideas. With the community of marginal artistic support behind him, he returned to Black Mountain College for his third and final summer. In September, he arrived in New York with a company of dancers behind him.

While the Eighth Street artists were on unsteady ground in the 1940s, “made to feel like outcasts, even derelicts, not part of the proper artistic society,” things were different in the 1950s.¹⁴⁵ There was a general sense that what they were doing mattered, that they were America’s vanguard, central actors on the world stage. As Carolyn Brown recalls: “An undercurrent of optimism swept through the community, and it *was* a community then, a real family, a brotherhood.”¹⁴⁶ Within this setting, Cage and Cunningham developed and

¹⁴⁴ Irving Sandler, *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*. New York Harper & Row, 1978, 33.

¹⁴⁵ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 35.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

strengthened their network of artist friends and collaborators, sharing ideas and experiments across the disciplines of art, music, dance and literature.

Gradually, Cunningham developed close ties to two artists in particular: Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Rauschenberg had recently returned from Black Mountain College (he and Cunningham overlapped in the summer of 1952) where he had been working primarily on his “white paintings,” visual parallels to Cage’s 4’33.”¹⁴⁷ After returning to New York, he began experimenting with collage paintings, which he would soon label “combines.” Johns arrived in New York in 1954 and was working at Marlboro bookstore until Rauschenberg convinced him to become a full-time artist.¹⁴⁸ In the mid-1950s Johns was beginning to work on his iconic target paintings (fig. 2.2). Working with the enormously influential ideas of Marcel Duchamp (as were Cage and Cunningham), both Johns and Rauschenberg were interested in mining a distinctly new direction for avant-garde painting, one that rejected the dominant ethos of Abstract Expressionism. As Roger Copeland argues, we might understand their repudiation of Abstract Expressionism as parallel to Cunningham’s rejection of Martha Graham. To cite one of many parallels, Copeland writes: “The raw materials utilized by all of these artists were appropriated from the external world in the manner of Duchamp’s ready-mades, rather than generated ‘instinctively’ or dredged up from the depths of the artist’s unconscious.”¹⁴⁹ Rauschenberg’s combine, *Trophy I* (fig. 2.3) epitomizes these ideas; composed of paint, fabric, old photographs, and wood, among other found objects, the painting announces its own materiality. With a sense of humor, Rauschenberg included a photograph of Cunningham (in his

¹⁴⁷ Cunningham’s engagement in these ideas is visible in his efforts to break down the formal distance between audience and stage space and in through the exploration of stillness.

¹⁴⁸ Annie Cohen-Solal, *Leo and His Circle: The Life of Leo Castelli*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, 240.

¹⁴⁹ Copeland, 83.

characteristic low arabesque with standing leg in pli   in the upper right, which he juxtaposed with a “ready-made” sign that reads “CAUTION: WATCH YOUR STEP.”

As we have seen, the first official collaboration between Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham materialized for the company’s 1954 performance of a dance called *Minutiae* for which Rauschenberg designed a free standing object, now considered to be the first of the artist’s Combines (fig. 1.5).¹⁵⁰ Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg each worked separately on their respective mediums and the final “coming together” of each of these elements—as if by chance—took place on the day of the performance. Cunningham’s choreography for *Minutiae* was generated entirely by chance. This was the first of many collaborations between Cunningham, Cage, and Rauschenberg; it marked the beginning of their artistic alliance. Reflecting on his early relationship with Rauschenberg, Cunningham recalls, “Bob Rauschenberg had been at Black Mountain and John [Cage] and I had met him there. There was a kind of compatibility about ideas and after we returned to New York we saw Bob a great deal and I realized we could probably work together.”¹⁵¹ Following *Minutiae*, Rauschenberg became the Merce Cunningham Dance Company resident designer, a post he held through 1964. Largely over the course of this ten year period, he and Cunningham collaborated on twenty-three performances for which Rauschenberg designed sets, costumes, lighting, and other d  cor.¹⁵² In addition to being a critical member of Cunningham’s network and one of his strongest connections to the world of avant-garde painters, Rauschenberg would become one of

¹⁵⁰ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 84.

¹⁵¹ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 51.

¹⁵² These include: *Springweather and People* (1955), *Suite for Five in Space and Time* (1956), *Nocturnes* (1956), *Labyrinthian Dances* (1957), *Changeling* (1957), *Antic Meet* (1958), *Summerspace* (1958), *Night Wandering* (1958), *From the Poems of White Stone* (1959), *Gambit for Dancers and Orchestra* (1959), *Rune* (1959), *Crisis* (1960), *Hands Birds* (1960), *Waka* (1960), *Music Walk with Dancers* (1960), *Aeon* (1961), *Field Dances* (1963), *Story* (1963), *Paired* (1964), *Winterbranch* (1964), *Travelogue* (1977), *Interscape* (2000), *Xover* (2007).

Cunningham's closest and most formative aesthetic collaborators, connected by mutual interest in Zen-Buddhist- and Dada-inspired experiments.

Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were the leaders of a younger generation of artists on Eighth Street and shared an apartment building on Pearl Street in the 1950s. In an essay titled *The Fabric of Friendship*, Johns recalls: "I never went to Black Mountain College—I had heard about it, but I didn't really know anything about it. Then I met those people who had all been there; there was a sort of community, maybe a dozen or so people in New York, who had been to Black Mountain."¹⁵³ Pretty quickly, Johns was pulled into the company and the surrounding community through his friendship with Rauschenberg who recruited Johns to help with the sets for *Minutiae*. Johns writes:

When I started helping Rauschenberg with sets and costumes for Merce, I didn't think that I was doing it for Merce; I was helping Bob. The first piece Bob did for Merce was *Minutiae*, and I think I helped him find a way to make the set stand up, that was all. I was close to Bob's working situation during those years and certainly offered my opinion about anything I happened to see, and frequently helped with dyeing tights – work on that level, whatever there was to be done.¹⁵⁴

Following Rauschenberg's departure in 1964, Johns agreed to lead the Cunningham troupe's artistic team. Johns, like Rauschenberg, offered a continued connection to the network surrounding avant-garde painters. His role, however, was somewhat less involved than Rauschenberg's; Johns preferred selecting other artists to collaborate instead.¹⁵⁵

Johns and Rauschenberg also connected Cunningham to Leo Castelli (1907-1999), the most important art dealer of their generation who emerged from the Eighth Street scene after fleeing Paris on the brink of Nazi occupation in 1941. Castelli established his own gallery in

¹⁵³ Jasper Johns, *Cage, Cunningham, Johns: Dancers on a Plane*. London: Thames and Hudson in Association with Anthony D'Offay Gallery, 1990, 137.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Collaborations between Cunningham and Johns include: *Suite de Danses* (1961), *Second Hand* (1970), *Objects* (1970), *Landrover* (1972), *TV Rerun* (1972), *Un jour ou deux* (1973), and *Exchange* (1978).

1957 and championed the work of Johns and Rauschenberg, giving each his own solo exhibition in 1958.¹⁵⁶ Castelli became one of the most important advocates of American art and cultivated the work of some of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. His far-reaching network is the subject of Annie Cohen-Solal's biography, *Leo And His Circle*.¹⁵⁷ As she explains, Castelli was instrumental in promoting the Pop, Minimal, and Conceptual art movements through the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein, Cy Twombly, Ellsworth Kelly, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, among others. Cohen-Solal's book reveals the powerful networks at work in the 1950s and 60s. Through these networks, Castelli emerged along with Rauschenberg and Johns, as did Merce Cunningham.

Rauschenberg's big break came in the summer of 1964 when he won the grand prize at the Venice Biennale. As we have seen, he was touring simultaneously with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company on their first major World Tour. That fall, *Time* magazine reported: "[Rauschenberg] won the Venice Biennale this summer, and his works are now as well known in London and Tokyo as in New York. He and his friend Jasper Johns are the leading painters of their generation."¹⁵⁸ Thus, though Cunningham was considered "marginal" in the world of modern dance, he was a central figure within the circles of the avant-garde painters who were becoming increasingly celebrated. Through his connections to the Castelli group and to Rauschenberg and Johns in particular, Cunningham continued to interact and collaborate with the "who's who" in contemporary art, including, Frank Stella (1967), Andy Warhol (1968), Robert Morris (1969), Bruce Nauman (1970), and Marcel Duchamp (1968).

¹⁵⁶ In 1951, Castelli famously organized the "Ninth Street Show" which featured the work of Abstract Expressionists.

¹⁵⁷ Cohen-Solal.

¹⁵⁸ *Time*, "Painting: Most Happy Fella." September 18, 1964.

Cage and the New School for Social Research

Cunningham and Cage's experiments in the 1950s—and particularly, those at Black Mountain College—paved the way for an explosion of avant-garde dance in the 1960s. They became closely tied to this proliferation, in part, through Cage's network at the New School for Social Research, which consisted of a group of avant-garde musicians and artists who attended his lectures. Cage and David Tudor began giving experimental concerts at the New School in the early 1950s and by 1956, Cage was asked to join the faculty.¹⁵⁹ Founded in 1918, on the edge of Greenwich Village, the school became a haven for exiled European intellectuals who fled to New York City during World War II. In addition to its impressive faculty in the social sciences, the school became well known for promoting experimental ideas in the arts.¹⁶⁰ Early on, Cage taught courses on the music of Virgil Thompson (who would appear in person on occasion) and Erik Satie, but by the later 1950s, he became famous for his Experimental Composition course.¹⁶¹ His students studied the ideas of Artaud, Duchamp, Satie, and Zen Buddhism and were encouraged to experiment with “intermedia theater events.”¹⁶² The course attracted a number of young artists who defined the emerging performance art movements of Fluxus and the Judson Dance Theater; they included Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Jackson MacLow, Jim Dine, and Robert Ellis Dunn.¹⁶³ Inspired by the ideas that Cage and Cunningham had cultivated since and even before their legendary experiments at Black Mountain College, these artists produced a series of experimental, intermedia objects and actions, which directly challenged the practices of traditional art making.

¹⁵⁹ Silverman, 133.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 133-4.

¹⁶² Sandler, 34.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

During his time at the New School, Cage developed a particularly strong relationship with a young musician named Toshi Ichianagi, who had experimented with magnetic tape at the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation, and his wife, Yoko Ono, who studied twelve-tone music composition as an undergraduate at Sarah Lawrence (where she was a classmate of one of Cunningham's dancers, Judith Dunn).¹⁶⁴ Ono admired Cage's ideas as an undergraduate and began working with him regularly beginning in 1958, when Ichianagi enrolled in Cage's course. Around this time (between 1955 and 1963), Ono was working on her instruction paintings, which have been described by Sarah Stone as "objects or texts that operate as paintings in the mind."¹⁶⁵ Drawing heavily on Cage's experiments, Ono shared his (and Cunningham's) interest in the ideas of Marcel Duchamp and Zen Buddhism.¹⁶⁶ In 1959, Ono and Ichianagi (along with Peggy Guggenheim) accompanied Cage on a tour to the Sogetsu Art Center in Japan for which they "had been spreading the word [...] before Cage ever got there, introducing Indeterminacy and arranging concerts of works by Cage, Feldman, and Wolff."¹⁶⁷ Following the success of this trip, "Plans were [...] in motion to ask Cage back to Japan next fall, this time with Cunningham's company."¹⁶⁸ Though not as quickly as was hoped, Cage would return to the Sogetsu Art Center with Cunningham on the company's world tour in 1964. Ichianagi would also compose the music for three of Cunningham dances in 1960, 1963, and 1976. Thus, through Cage, Cunningham connected to the network of experimental artists at the New School, who would in turn, helped him to cultivate a presence in the avant-garde circles in Tokyo.

¹⁶⁴ Silverman, 183. and Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 361.

¹⁶⁵ Sarah Stone, "Yoko Ono's Instruction Paintings, 1955-1963." Undergraduate thesis, Wellesley College, 2004, 1.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Silverman, 183.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 185.

The Judson Dance Theater

One might say that postmodern dance was born in the summer of 1952, during the first “happenings” at Black Mountain College, and that it was re-born ten years later in Cunningham’s studio on the top floor of The Living Theater building.¹⁶⁹ Realistically, it would be impossible to pinpoint a precise moment of origin, and yet, many historians point to July of 1962, when a group of dancers (most of them were training or had trained with Cunningham) decided to transform their experiments in movement into a public concert at the Judson Memorial Church in Washington Square.

Leading the group was a musician named Robert Ellis Dunn who was married to a Cunningham dancer (Judith Dunn) and trained with John Cage at the New School for Social Research between 1956 and 1960. Per Cage’s suggestion, Dunn began offering classes in dance composition at the Cunningham studio in the fall of 1960.¹⁷⁰ For many of the dancers who took his classes, Cunningham’s aesthetic was a starting point for their own experimental ideas about movement. In particular, the Judson group was interested in Cunningham’s broadening of the dance vocabulary and the idea that without narrative, bodies in motion could be independently expressive. As Sally Banes writes, “the post-modernists propose (as do Cunningham and Balanchine) that the formal qualities of dance might be reason enough for choreography, and that the purpose of making dances might be simply to make a framework within which we look at movement for its own sake.”¹⁷¹ Despite this fundamental point of agreement, the Judson group differed from Cunningham in their rejection of a formalized technique or unified style. Even so,

¹⁶⁹ Sally Banes. *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research, 1983.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷¹ Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 15.

the 1960s was a time when dancers moved freely between the Cunningham Studio and the Judson Church, exchanging experimental ideas about the movement and composition.

The connections between the Judson Group and Cunningham's studio reveal Cunningham's centrality in the explosion of postmodern experiments in the 1960s. Among the Judson dancers, many originally trained with Cunningham, including, most importantly, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Simone (Forti) Morris, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown, and Meredith Monk.¹⁷² Furthermore, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the art community at the Judson Memorial Church featured the work of artists who had studied with Cage at the New School for Social Research; as we have seen, these artists were also a part of Cunningham's own extended network. Allan Kaprow and Jim Dine, for example, initiated the early "Happenings" at the church, even before the Judson Dance Theater concert in 1962.¹⁷³

Thus, before the American public was completely convinced that Cunningham's experiments mattered, the Judson dancers used them as the basis for a newer, more-conceptual kind of performance art. As Sally Banes has written: "Cunningham inspired much of post-modern dance by serving both as an inspiration for further innovation and as an authority to be criticized."¹⁷⁴ Importantly, it was among the community of marginal artists and musicians, and not the dance establishment that Cunningham began to be considered "an authority." Thus, we might understand Cunningham as a liminal figure in two regards: first, in terms of his way of working on the margins, but also in terms of his complex status as a maverick figure. In relation to Judson and other postmodern experiments, Cunningham's "radical" embrace of different

¹⁷² Ibid., 11.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 25. In the spirit of the Black Mountain College *Theater Piece* (1952), the Happenings consisted of intermedia actions and events that embraced notions of indeterminacy and interaction between art and its environment.

¹⁷⁴ Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 10.

media became the basis for his own “authority” and historiographic niche. In other words, he was defined both by his radical broadening of the definition of dance, but also by his “traditional” commitment to dance technique. Was Cunningham the “radical iconoclast” or the “old master?” In the following chapter, I will examine the critical discourse surrounding this question.

The Alternative Academy

If we return to where we began at the photograph of the company on its way to Europe, we can now understand Cunningham’s unprecedented position as a modern choreographer. Rejected by the world of the dance establishment based on his radical aesthetic, Cunningham was embraced by the marginal avant-garde communities at Black Mountain College and on Eighth Street, whose shared ideas and experiments became the foundation for Cunningham’s alternative network. Furthermore, these artists were becoming increasingly central to American modernism and were celebrated as such in 1970 in Irving Sandler’s *The Triumph of American Painting*.¹⁷⁵ As we will see from the critical discourse in the following chapter, Cunningham built his own legacy in part on their success. Furthermore, on the basis of Cunningham’s collaboration with avant-garde musicians and artists, his intermediality was promoted by a new generation of artists, with whom he continued to interact.

As we can see, Cunningham’s network offers a sharp contrast to that of Martha Graham who was embraced by the dance community as the chief purveyor of American modern dance. This perceived status connected her to the powerful institutional “taste-makers,” including most notably, the “experts” behind the U.S. State Department’s Cultural Presentations Program. As we will see in Chapter Four, however, Cunningham’s alternative network became the basis for an

¹⁷⁵ Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting; a History of Abstract Expressionism*. New York: Praeger, 1970.

alternative system of patronage. With the additional boost of the critical discourse that established his genealogy, he too, would become an iconic figure in dance.

Chapter 3

Framing the New America: Early Critical Discourse on Cunningham

“Mr. Cunningham is an iconoclast and is welcome in an art that has always suffered from a surfeit of icons and a deficiency of iconoclasts.”¹⁷⁶ –1964

“Cage and Cunningham and Rauschenberg ideas—which were revolutionary, even scandalous, fifteen years ago—are accepted by today’s younger generation as quite natural and are even mouthed by younger choreographers as though original to them.”¹⁷⁷ –1975

“Actually, in dance there’s a fairly explicit tradition that for years has cried out to be called—after its preceptor—mercism. If Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn could become a noun (Denishawn), why not Merce Cunningham?”¹⁷⁸ –1978

Within the short span of two decades, Merce Cunningham went from being the “avant-garde iconoclast” to being an “Old Master,” worthy of his own “ism.” However impressive his ascent, the path to “mercism” was replete with obstacles. In the 1950s and early 1960s, it was almost impossible for Cunningham to get press coverage; when he did, the critics wrote about the scandal of his radical aesthetic and experiments, and very few of them could make sense of what he was doing or how to place him historically. In a 1956 review of the Cunningham troupe in *Dance News*, for example, Maxine Cushing Gray wrote: “The dreadful thought that this group was on its way to the Far East to represent current American stage art was chilling enough, but the self-indulgence in movement which was served up in the name of modern dance [...] left us quite numb. We respect the right of the ticket holder and we think he deserves to have something communicated to him.”¹⁷⁹ Cunningham was perceived as an outsider, whose “self-indulgent” anti-art had no identifiable tradition in the history of modern dance.

¹⁷⁶ Clive Barnes, “U.S. Dancers Win Hearts in London: Merce Cunningham Troupe Conquers Conservatism.”

¹⁷⁷ Carolyn Brown, essay in *Merce Cunningham*, edited by James Klosty, 19-31. New York: Saturday Review, 1975, 31.

¹⁷⁸ Arlene Croce, “The Mercists.” *The New Yorker* (3 April 1978). Rpt. in *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time: Essays 1944-1992*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 132-137. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1992, 132.

¹⁷⁹ Maxine Cushing Gray, “Seattle Season Features Local and Visiting Groups.” *Dance News*. February 1956, 4.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Cunningham's aesthetic began to resonate in America as an expression of vernacular culture, freedom, and democracy. At that same moment, however, Cunningham's ideas were suddenly understood as those of yesterday's avant-garde: accepted and mainstream. Reflecting on this shift in 1988, *New York Times* dance critic, Alistair Macaulay, wrote: "a month of Merce no longer provokes astonished hosannas or outraged jeers. He is simply a landmark. Has something been lost in the process? No doubt."¹⁸⁰ By the 1970s, Cunningham had been framed and placed in an artistic category, one that was perceived as slipping into history. What was it about Cunningham's work and reception that made him seem so radical in the post-war years and suddenly an "Old Master" by the 1970s? And what, as Macaulay suggests, "was lost in the process?"

Part I: Cunningham's Self-descriptions

One of the ways that critics began to place and understand Cunningham was by establishing a map-able genealogy of his ideas. In order to understand the way they framed him, however, we must first understand the language Cunningham used to describe his own aesthetic. This language placed him in direct opposition to the aesthetic of Martha Graham, and in line, instead, with the spirit of mid-century modernism. Lastly, it was heavy in allusions to anarchy, freedom, and democracy, which carried powerful political implications in the Cold War context.

Though this chapter will inevitably present examples of aesthetic affinity, it is not my primary intention to analyze the exchange of aesthetic influence among Cunningham, the artists of his prescribed genealogy, and the critics involved in shaping this genealogy; as we have seen in the previous chapter, Cunningham was part of a network in which these ideas were fluid.

¹⁸⁰ Alistair Macaulay, "The Merce Experience." *The New Yorker* (4 April 1988).

Rather, this chapter argues that in articulating his own engagement with these ideas, Cunningham was instrumental in the formation of a critical genealogy of his aesthetic. Ironically, in expressing his relevance and by attempting to carve out his place in the symbolic order, Cunningham assisted in the critical discourse that framed him as a monument of the past.

Cunningham as anti-Graham

When Cunningham spoke about his choreography, he explicitly distinguished it from Martha Graham's by asserting that his dances were not symbolic. Reflecting in part on his experience studying with Graham, Cunningham said: "I grew up with the business of dance movements meaning something specific, but it always seemed to me that a movement could mean a lot of different things, and that it didn't make much sense to act like a dictator."¹⁸¹ Here, Cunningham's implied departure from Graham's use of symbolism is clear. He condemns her method of assigning to movement a singular meaning and likens it to that of a dictator. In doing so, Cunningham politicizes this difference between them and suggests that there is something democratic—anti—"dictatorial"—about his rejection of symbolism. In a similar vein, Cunningham contrasts his expressive style with Graham's. When asked about the dissemination of his ideas, for example, he said: "I have in a sense tried to avoid any concern with power and ego, self-expression and all that."¹⁸² Here, Cunningham subtly criticizes the very basis of Graham's aesthetic: the idea that dancing and choreography are vehicles for "*self-expression*." Again, his comment is almost moralistic in that it frames Graham as interested in "power and ego." Cunningham wanted his audience to know that he was interested in a more open kind of

¹⁸¹ Calvin Tomkins, "On Collaboration." Text for an exhibition by Merce Cunningham (Multiples, 1974). Rpt. in *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time: Essays 1944-1992*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 44-47. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1992, 47.

¹⁸² Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 162.

expression, one that wasn't wrapped up in the self. In highlighting this openness, he also articulated the freedom it afforded the audience. In describing one of the legendary happenings at Black Mountain College, for example, Cunningham claims: "Nothing was intended to be other than it was, a complexity of events that the spectators could deal with as each chose."¹⁸³ In framing interpretation as a matter of "choice," Cunningham invites his spectators to participate in a game where there are no rules, where they can take away whatever meaning they find. This is, of course, quite different from the relationship between dance and spectator in Graham's theory of practice. Hers is a system in which the artist communicates *to* the spectator, a meaning that is both specific and fixed. In Graham's dance, the implied role of the spectator is to identify and interpret that meaning. Cunningham reiterated his belief in the spectator's ability to interpret freely on a number of occasions. He invited the critics to embrace the freedoms of reception that he offered the audience as an expression of democracy.

Lastly, Cunningham articulated his opposition to Graham by emphasizing his spirit of experimentation. When asked about the relationship between his approach and those of Balanchine, Graham, and Robbins, Cunningham responded: "Well, there are a multiplicity of routes to travel. But I saw these ideas that were coming up as questions to be asked, to be worked at – that is, in the nature of an adventure along unknown routes. So I attempted to try them out, to ride the horse close to the chasm."¹⁸⁴ Essentially, Cunningham is highlighting the "adventure" implicit in his experimental approach. He presents Graham as providing answers and thereby, closing discussion; in implied contrast, Cunningham raises questions and ways to consider them, thereby opening the discussion. The "work" involved becomes shared in that Cunningham's

¹⁸³ Merce Cunningham, "A Collaborative Process Between Music and Dance." *Tri-Quarterly* 54 (1982). Rpt. In *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time: Essays 1944-1992*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 138-150. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1992, 141.

¹⁸⁴ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 141-2.

questions are meant to be explored both in the creation of choreography and in the experience of viewing it. Cunningham is also celebrating the risk involved in exploring “unknown routes,” in positioning himself as directly opposed to Graham’s (as well as Robbins’ and Balanchine’s) pursuit of a single, reliable route. We might interpret Cunningham’s language of experimentation as another way in which he asserts his Americanness. Was Cunningham intentionally likening his own experiments to the Great Experiment of the American nation?

Cunningham as mid-century modern

Cunningham’s language also invited connections to the twentieth-century visual experiments of Abstract Expressionism, Dada, Neo-Dada, and Pop. To begin, Cunningham articulated his understanding of dance’s expressiveness in the language of formalism; he stressed (on numerous occasions) that the meaning in his dances lay in an exploration of the technique of dance itself, and in the power of each isolated movement rather than a prescribed emotion or narrative. In 1952, for example, he wrote: “if the dancer *dances*, everything is there. The meaning is there, if that’s what you want.”¹⁸⁵ Cunningham reiterated this idea in similar terms when he said: “For me, the subject of dancing is dancing itself. It is not meant to represent something else, whether psychological, literary, or aesthetic.”¹⁸⁶ In 1950s America, this perspective had growing resonance via the pervasive ideas of Clement Greenberg who championed the Abstract Expressionists and the “purity” of their abstract aesthetic. In his criticism, Greenberg asserted: “The essence of Modernism lies as I see it in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but

¹⁸⁵ Merce Cunningham, “The Impermanent Art.” (1952). Rpt. in David Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, edited by Melissa Harris, 86-87. New York: Aperture, 1997, 86.

¹⁸⁶ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 139.

in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”¹⁸⁷ Within this framework, Cunningham’s language of formalism—the belief that dance’s primary subject was dance itself—mirrored the Abstract Expressionist’s belief (or at least interpolated by Greenberg) that the painter’s primary subject was painting. Though Cunningham was not necessarily trying to assert a strong aesthetic link between his own art and Abstract Expressionism, he spoke in a language that invited critics to frame him in this light. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Greenberg’s ideas strongly influenced the public discourse on artistic values. Thus, as we will see, Cunningham’s formalist vocabulary helped to place him in the “right” light and thereby, pull him into the central symbolic order.

Similarly, although perhaps less overtly, Cunningham articulated his ideas in a language that resonated with the theoretical writings of Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978). In his essay, “Dancing in Space and Time,” written in 1952, Cunningham proposed: “For me, it seems enough that dancing is a spiritual exercise in physical form, and that what is seen, is what it is. [...] Dancing is a visible action of life.”¹⁸⁸ Cunningham’s use of the terms “physical form” and “visible action of life” invites a connection to Rosenberg’s criticism. Like Greenberg, Rosenberg championed the Abstract Expressionists as the great inheritors of the modern tradition. For him, however, the focus was on the *act* of painting. In his seminal essay, “The American Action Painters,” Rosenberg wrote: “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or “express” an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was

¹⁸⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting.” In *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, edited by John O’Brien, 85-93. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, 85.

¹⁸⁸ Merce Cunningham, “Space, Time and Dance.” *Trans/Formation* 1/3 (1952). Rpt. in *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time: Essays 1944-1992*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 37-39. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1992, 39.

not a picture but an event.”¹⁸⁹ For Rosenberg, the meaning in the new American abstract paintings lay in the physical “act” or “event” of their creation. Once painting became a reflection of the artist’s actions, Rosenberg argued, it was made “of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting,” he concluded, “[had] broken down every distinction between art and life.”¹⁹⁰ It is helpful to understand these ideas in relation to the paintings of Willem de Kooning (fig. 3.1), whose abstract splatters of paint were the products of a highly physical painting process. For Rosenberg, the meaning and expressivity of de Kooning’s abstract paintings rested in the physical act of their creation. Furthermore, Rosenberg understood the paintings to be a reflection of de Kooning, and thus of life itself.¹⁹¹

If we return to Cunningham’s own words, we can see that he expressed his ideas in similar terms. Cunningham’s description of dance as an “exercise in physical form” reflects Rosenberg’s emphasis on the physical “event” of painting. Moreover, Cunningham’s articulation of dance as “a visible action of life,” presents a compelling parallel to Rosenberg’s description of the Abstract Expressionists’ perceived elimination of “every distinction between art and life.” As with Greenberg, Cunningham’s articulated link to Rosenberg suggested that his experiments mirrored those of the Abstract Expressionists. Because their ideas commanded the predominant discourse, this connection would help to define Cunningham’s place in New York’s burgeoning post-war vanguard culture.

In what is perhaps a reflection of greater aesthetic affinity, Cunningham frequently articulated aesthetic parallels to the experiments of his collaborator, Robert Rauschenberg. I will examine two examples of these links, namely, his articulated resistance to symbolism (which, as

¹⁸⁹ Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*. New York: Horizon, 1959, 25.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹¹ Willem de Kooning lived next door to Edwin Denby (and Rudy Burkhardt), whose early reviews, as we have seen, championed Cunningham as a gifted “American” choreographer.

we have seen, positioned him in opposition to Martha Graham) and his belief in the direct relationship between art and life (which was also a source of connection to Abstract Expressionism). In one of his earliest essays, *The Impermanent Art* (1952), Cunningham's opening sentence frames the subsequent writing as central to contemporary art practice and ideas: "There has been a shift of emphasis in the practice of the arts of painting, music and dancing during the last few years. [...] These ideas seem primarily concerned with something being exactly what it is in its time and place, and not in its having actual or symbolic reference to other things. A thing is just that thing."¹⁹² As we can see from the random and absurd assortment of objects in his Combine paintings from the 1950s, Rauschenberg embodied the ideas to which Cunningham's statement referred. *Monogram* (1955, fig. 3.2), perhaps his most famous Combine, incorporates several "found objects," including, most prominently, a taxidermied goat with a rubber tire around its stomach. The absurdity of these objects called attention to Rauschenberg's desire to initiate a "shift of emphasis," away from "symbolic reference" and towards seeing things as they are: in this case, a taxidermied goat and a tire placed on a panel. Rauschenberg's Combines, such as *Monogram*, offered a kind of Dadaist visual poetry, in which objects assume new and open-ended identities through their improbable juxtapositions. This was also the thinking behind *Antic Meet* (1958), during which Cunningham dances a solo with a wooden chair strapped to his back (fig. 3.3). Critics frequently misunderstood the absurdist humor in these actions, attempting—in the mode of traditional modern dance discourse—to make sense of them symbolically, and thereby missing the point. In 1960, *Time* magazine reported Cunningham's articulated rejection of this way of thinking about dance: "'Symbols,' says he, 'don't interest me. You see a chair strapped on my back. Can't we just say, 'How

¹⁹² Merce Cunningham, "The Impermanent Art," 86.

strange’?”¹⁹³ By asking his audience to embrace the chair purely for what it was, Cunningham articulated intentions and proposed experiments that paralleled those of Rauschenberg in *Monogram*. The ideas of both artists were firmly rooted in their admiration of Marcel Duchamp, a “benevolent presence in the activities and imaginations of the downtown artists” in the 1950s and 60s.¹⁹⁴ Thus, Cunningham’s articulated resistance to symbolism framed him doubly as, on the one hand, distinct from Martha Graham, and on the other, aligned with the experiments of Rauschenberg and operating in the philosophical tradition of Marcel Duchamp.

Cunningham also aligned his ideas with those of Rauschenberg, among other artists, by articulating his belief in dance (and art) as an affirmation and mirror of life. This too, is visible in Rauschenberg’s *Monogram*, in which the artist transfers elements of every day life onto the surface of his painting. Rauschenberg famously asserted this aesthetic by saying: “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in the gap between the two.”¹⁹⁵ Like Rauschenberg, Cunningham was engaged with the far-reaching statement: What constitutes art in the twentieth century? Why should art and aesthetics be separate from lived experience? Why is lived experience not art? He continuously engaged in aesthetic experiments to bridge the “gap” between art and life. Cunningham asserted this connection during a lecture-demonstration in April of 1953. According to *Dance Observer*, Cunningham claimed that he got the idea of using chance operations “while watching the chance relationships of people in the street, through a high window.”¹⁹⁶ In dealing with Cunningham’s simplification of the source of his interest in chance, Carolyn Brown suggests that perhaps this was “an explanation that he felt could be

¹⁹³ *Time*, “Music: How Strange.” February 29, 1960.

¹⁹⁴ Stone, 16.

¹⁹⁵ Tomkins, *The Bride and The Bachelors*, 193.

¹⁹⁶ *Dance Observer* (1953) quoted in Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 52.

easily grasped and understood by the general public.”¹⁹⁷ Indeed, this explanation resonates with the views of both John Cage and Edwin Denby. While it is entirely possible, I would also suggest that Cunningham took the question as an opportunity to highlight his interest in incorporating elements of everyday life, and by doing so, to connect his aesthetic to that of Rauschenberg (and by extension, to the tradition of Dada). The final paragraph of *Space, Time, and Dance* (cited earlier in my discussion of Harold Rosenberg), offers another example of Cunningham’s publicly proclaimed interest in the intersection between art and life:

I do not believe it is possible to be ‘too simple.’ What the dancer does is the most realistic of all possible things, and to pretend that a man standing on a hill could be doing everything except just standing is simply divorce—divorce from life, from the sun coming up and going down, from clouds in front of the sun, from the rain that comes from the clouds and sends you into the drugstore for a cup of coffee, from each thing that succeeds each thing. Dancing is a visible action of life.¹⁹⁸

In order to allow his dancers to be “the most realistic of all possible things,” Cunningham embraced all movement, considering nothing “too simple” or every-day.¹⁹⁹ By choreographing using a structure based on time (rather than music), he linked the worlds of performer (art) and spectator (life). As his writing suggests, Cunningham’s chance-generated continuity also helped to evoke a parallel in dance to random moments of “every-day” life. In other words, he argued that via chance, a choreographed moment could potentially resemble the instance when “the rain that comes from the clouds and sends you into the drugstore for a cup of coffee.” On one hand, Cunningham’s articulated belief that art reflects life tied him to the theoretical framework of Harold Rosenberg and, by extension, to the Abstract Expressionists; on the other hand, however, it linked him, perhaps more directly, to the contemporary experiments of Rauschenberg. As we

¹⁹⁷ Brown, Carolyn, *Chance and Circumstance*, 52.

¹⁹⁸ Merce Cunningham, “Space, Time and Dance,” 39.

¹⁹⁹ In a performance of *Variations V*, performed in 1965, Cunningham rode a bike across the stage. See Vaughan p. 147 for a more complete description.

will see, Rauschenberg's work was seen as new and radical in the 1950s and early 1960s, and it was also beginning to generate critical attention. Thus, Cunningham's effort to articulate the link between his work and Rauschenberg's was another way of asserting his own aesthetic resonance in the American discourse on contemporary art.

Cunningham as Anarchist

Finally, Cunningham articulated his aesthetic in the language of "freedom" and "anarchy," and in doing so, suggested a possible relationship to the aesthetic discourses that mirrored Cold War politics. We have seen how this language is embedded in Cunningham's asserted opposition to Martha Graham. He critiqued her "dictatorial" persona, and presented himself as a new kind of artist, one who was less concerned with ego and power, and more concerned with the shared—and in this sense, democratic—experiment. Cunningham heightened this contrast by characterizing his aesthetic as: "a kind of anarchy where people may work freely together."²⁰⁰ Articulating his aesthetic in terms of "anarchy" was one of many ways in which Cunningham asserted its inherent freedom. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Cunningham consistently expressed his aesthetic in terms of the many freedoms it afforded the disciplined dancer, choreographer, and spectator. For Cunningham, these freedoms were tied to possibilities in space, time, movement, the body, continuity, media, and sound (among other things). In outlining his aesthetic in *Space, Time, and Dance*, Cunningham employed this language extensively:

More freeing into *space* than the [musical] theme and manipulation 'holdup' would be a formal structure based on *time*. Now time can be an awful lot of bother with the ordinary pinch-penny counting that has to go on with it, but if one can think of the structure as a space of time in which anything can happen in any sequence of movement event, and any

²⁰⁰ Merce Cunningham quoted in Tomkins, "A Kind of Anarchy," *Saturday Review*, November 8, 1973.

length of stillness can take place, then the counting is an aid towards freedom, rather than a discipline towards mechanization. A use of time-structure also frees the music into space, making the connection between the dance and the music one of individual autonomy connected at structural points. The result is the dance is free to act as it chooses, as is the music.²⁰¹

Though the quote is concerned primarily with aesthetic, it resonates with the highly pervasive Cold War political discourse by alluding to the opposition between the organic system of American freedom and the “mechanized” system of the Soviet Union. The unmistakable political undertones at work in this description suggest that Cunningham may have been framing his aesthetic in terms of its “Americanness.” Whether or not this was his intention, the language of “freedom” had profound resonance in the Cold War moment. At a time when democracy was constantly perceived to be under threat, Cunningham’s aesthetic language framed him as a symbol of American freedom. The critics embraced his cultural relevance; and used it to frame Cunningham as the New America.

Part II: Critical Genealogies

As I have argued in the first portion of this chapter, Cunningham situated himself as an artist who broke with the tradition of modern dance in a way that was intensely relevant to contemporary art and politics. Cunningham’s words served as a key foundation on which the critics based their analysis of his genealogy. In order to recognize why establishing this derivative genealogy mattered, we must first understand the operations of genealogy in a more general sense. To begin, an artistic genealogy works to legitimize the new, radical or, avant-garde by connecting it to a coherent historical narrative. This established narrative, however, quickly naturalizes the sense of radicalism or vitality surrounding an artistic endeavor.

²⁰¹ Merce Cunningham, “Space, Time and Dance,” 39.

Cunningham, as we will see, was naturalized as a modern choreographer in the tradition of Martha Graham. Established historical narrative also underscores the value placed on the established historical canon, what might be called “normative epistemology.” Finally, genealogy suggests that there is a kind of timeless essence to art that manifests itself in different guises throughout multiple generations. Cunningham’s critics articulate this underlying belief in an identifiable and recurring “essence” through their discussion of Cunningham’s “classicism,” for example, a quality that could be traced back to the great masters of dance: George Balanchine and Marius Petipa.

Each critical act of genealogical “legitimization” de-emphasized the vitality of Cunningham’s experiment such that in the short span of twenty years, he went from being the radical anarchist with an ambiguous and uncharted genealogy, to an established member of multiple historical narratives. The critics’ genealogy runs parallel to Cunningham’s own self-fashioning and can be understood as framing him in similar, but nuanced ways. The second half of this chapter will demonstrate the ways in which the critics framed Cunningham’s articulated aesthetic into traceable and relevant genealogies. In memorializing Cunningham as the new Martha Graham, “Neo-Dada,” and a symbol of the American century, the critics ushered him into history, naturalizing the vitality of his contemporary experiments.

Cunningham: The New Martha Graham

When attempting to locate Cunningham within dance history, the critics oscillated between connections to the “classicism” of Petipa and Balanchine, the scandal and avant-gardism of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, and Martha Graham’s homespun tradition of modern dance. In a 1947 review of Cunningham’s *The Seasons*, the *New York Times* dance critic, John

Martin (who frequently refused to see or review Cunningham), wrote: “If it is the kind of thing that awakens memories of Diaghileff and the experimental nineteen-twenties, it is nevertheless a striking stage spectacle.”²⁰² *The Seasons*, which was commissioned by Lincoln Kirstein and performed by George Balanchine’s *Ballet Society* (the precursor to New York City Ballet), might be considered Cunningham’s most balletic or traditional dance. The choreography reflected Cunningham’s “attempt to express the traditional Indian view of the seasons” in an abstracted sense (i.e. through “a love duet [or] a person alone”).²⁰³ As Copeland writes, “Cunningham’s choreography in the mid-1940’s still placed considerable emphasis on psychological motivation and emotional expressivity.”²⁰⁴ According to David Vaughan, Cunningham’s notes for the piece “suggest that he wanted to make a proper ballet, in the traditional sense [...] that is, a work with a theme as well as a choreographic structure.”²⁰⁵ Thus, compared to Cunningham’s other dances, *The Seasons* was hardly revolutionary or radical in approach or technique. Nevertheless, the dance was framed by Martin as a work of theatrical “spectacle,” not unlike the scandalous avant-garde provocations of Sergei Diaghilev. Twenty-eight years later, David Vaughan shows us the longevity of this critical link, in an article that solidifies the parallel by contrasting their avant-garde collaborations:

Merce Cunningham’s major works over the last 20 years have been a series of distinguished collaborations: as in the Diaghilev ballets, the choreography, music, and décor have been of equal importance, with the significant difference that instead of the integrated spectacle of Diaghilev’s time, a Cunningham work is what one might call a disintegrated spectacle, in which the elements are independent of each other—and often are brought together only in the very last stage of creation.²⁰⁶

²⁰² John Martin, “Ballet Society Offers Two Premiers: ‘The Seasons’ a Reminder of Diaghileff.” *New York Times*, May 1947.

²⁰³ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham Fifty Years*, 40.

²⁰⁴ Copeland, 72.

²⁰⁵ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 40.

²⁰⁶ David Vaughan, “Diaghilev/Cunningham,” *Art Journal* 34, No. 2 (Winter, 1974-1975): 137.

Though, as Vaughan writes, Diaghilev and Cunningham went about their collaborations in entirely opposing ways—one “integrated” and the other “disintegrated”—these differences were underplayed by most critics who sought to connect them based on their shared interests in breaking with tradition and creating a spectacle of mixed media. By 1975, Cunningham’s genealogical connection to Diaghilev was solidified. As a result, he was framed, in similar terms, as an avant-garde Master.

Though Cunningham had very little ballet training, critics also linked him to the “classicism” of ballet’s “great masters.”²⁰⁷ During his world tour performances in London, for example, Alexander Bland, a dance critic for *The Observer*, wrote: “We are not so far here from the world of Petipa and Balanchine, and the total effect has the aloof conviction of the best classical dance.”²⁰⁸ By this time, Balanchine, like Graham, was a pillar of American modernism and a staple of ballet establishment. By linking Cunningham to Balanchine and Petipa, Bland suggested that his aesthetic might be the next step in the climb of progressive classicisms. This suggestion is made even more powerful when we consider its relationship to the pervasive discourse of formalism. By 1964, Greenberg’s ideas were widespread and had defined a culture that valued abstraction.²⁰⁹ Indeed, in this environment, the shift from Petipa to Balanchine to Cunningham would be celebrated as a progression of innovation.

The critical genealogy that tied Cunningham to Balanchine was solidified by Calvin Tomkins in 1968 when he wrote: “Cunningham studied there [at Balanchine’s School of American Ballet] for two years, on and off, while continuing to perform with the Graham troupe,

²⁰⁷ As we have seen, Cunningham spent a couple years circa 1942 studying at the School of American Ballet with George Balanchine, per Martha Graham’s suggestion. He also taught classes at the School between 1948 and 1950. For more on this subject see: Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*.

²⁰⁸ Bland, “The Future Bursts In: Ballet.”

²⁰⁹ Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005.

and the training, he feels, was invaluable. It was certainly as important an influence as Miss Graham's in the development of his own style."²¹⁰ Long before 1968, Balanchine—who had fled the Soviet Union in 1924—was an American icon, lionized by the U.S. government as a symbol of the triumph of democracy. Over the course of twenty years, the critical link to Balanchine's aesthetic, helped to place Cunningham in this politicized light. In 1968, following Cunningham's tour of Latin America, the State Department finally embraced him as the new American icon: "Cunningham and Cage certainly demonstrated once again and brilliantly that America is the most 'contemporary' culture in the world, the most daring, the most iconoclastic, the most totally and anarchistically free."²¹¹

As Tomkins' statement suggests, the critics were also negotiating Cunningham's position in relation to Martha Graham's equally iconic tradition of modern dance. Almost all of the early reviews mention this aspect of Cunningham's training. In a 1954 review of Cunningham's first New York season, for example, Margaret Lloyd wrote, "He is a ballet-trained dancer of pronounced aeriality, a former member of Martha Graham's company, now given to experimental art."²¹² Without much of a contemporary critical framework, Lloyd makes sense of Cunningham in terms of his departure from Graham's aesthetic. We understand his "aeriality" and experimentation as logical developments of an established tradition. In 1968, *Time* magazine highlighted the same genealogy: "Merce Cunningham, 46, dropped out from the Graham company 21 years ago because of her 'psychological drift.'"²¹³ Here, Cunningham is set apart from Graham based on his rejection of her outdated interest in expressing inner emotion. In other

²¹⁰ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 255.

²¹¹ Letter from the American Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State, September 4, 1968, Group II, Manuscript Collection 468, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

²¹² Margaret Lloyd, "Novelties in the Dance." *Christian Science Monitor*, January 9, 1954.

²¹³ *Time*, "Dance: The Great Leap Forward." March 15, 1968.

word's Cunningham's aesthetic shift was accepted and naturalized as the new "drift" or transgression within an established historical continuity. Again, this genealogy was solidified by Calvin Tomkins: "Out of the so-called contraction-and-release technique of Martha Graham, Cunningham developed an articulation of the back and torso that is large and free—something not found in the ballet, where the torso is held relatively rigid at all times. Nor is it found in the Graham choreography, with its tense and dramatically contorted bodies."²¹⁴ Tomkins' essay goes on to explain Graham's influence on Cunningham, while at the same time, differentiating Cunningham's departure from her approach. By framing him as a modern dancer in the outdated tradition of Martha Graham, the critics assigned Cunningham to the same fate; gradually, they took away his vitality and naturalized his "iconoclasm."

Cunningham as Abstract Expressionist

Cunningham's critics also attempted to define his art historical genealogy in relation to his unusual ties to the avant-garde communities of Greenwich Village. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Cunningham's formalist language became the critical framework by which critics understood and labeled his dances "abstract." Cunningham, however, disliked and resisted this characterization, hence its absence within his own aesthetic vocabulary.²¹⁵ Carolyn Brown addresses the critical fascination with Cunningham's "abstraction" and describes a question and answer session following a 1953 performance, in which one critic "antagonistically" and "disapprovingly" asked whether *Suite By Chance* was "an abstract dance."²¹⁶ Despite Cunningham's professed belief that human bodies can never be abstract, the term continued to be

²¹⁴ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 263.

²¹⁵ For more on Cunningham's feelings on being characterized as "abstract" see: Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 53.

²¹⁶ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 53.

used almost half-hazardously.²¹⁷ In a 1958 review of *Nocturnes* (fig. 3.4), for example, Louis Horst described the dance as “gentle and cool romanticism *abstracted* and distilled with beautiful gestures toward fantasy” (emphasis mine).²¹⁸ His writing evokes the pervasive American taste for the purity (or “distillation”) of abstract art. In 1968, this critical vocabulary was still widely employed. *Time* declared Cunningham’s work to be “total abstraction, eschewing the clichés and conventions of gesture, costume and music by which both ballet and modern dance seek to evoke moods, emotions and dramatic climaxes.”²¹⁹ On one hand, describing Cunningham in terms of “total abstraction” was a way of celebrating his innovation and break from the tradition of Martha Graham’s narrative-driven self-expression; on the other hand, it provided an additional link to the increasingly celebrated work of the Abstract Expressionists. Though, as we have seen, Cunningham was speaking in a language that paralleled the critical discourse of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, his stated rejection of the term “abstract” suggests his resistance to the critical effort to box him in within the binary “abstraction” vs. “narrative” discourse. In the context of this dominant framework, the point of Cunningham’s abandonment of narrative—his belief that any movement was evocative and expressive, whether or not the choreography intended to express something specific—was frequently missed.

The critics, however, continued to describe Cunningham within the theoretical framework of Abstract Expressionism. In her review of Cunningham in 1963, for example, Jill Johnston writes: “Cunningham belongs to that great shift of focus—from representation to the

²¹⁷ Brown suggests that Cunningham gave this answer in response to the critics’ question. He articulated this idea again, however, during a lecture-demonstration given in 1957. Excerpts can be found in David Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 100-101.

²¹⁸ Louis Horst, “11th American Dance Festival.” *Dance Observer* 25, no. 7 (1958): 101.

²¹⁹ *Time*, “The Dance: Having a Ball in Brooklyn.” May 24, 1968.

concentration on materials—which is so central to the revolution in art in this century.”²²⁰

Johnston places Cunningham directly within the Greenberg’s formalist framework, in which art is valued based on its attention to the “materials” of its medium. In this case, Johnston celebrates Cunningham’s focus on the language of dance. In doing so, she links the virtues of his aesthetic to those of the Abstract Expressionists’ (as identified by Greenberg). As a result, she frames Cunningham in terms of the even “great[er] shift of focus” from the art of Europe to the art of America, asserting his centrality in the “American Century.”

With Harold Rosenberg’s exaltation of the physical “act” of painting in mind, we can return to the same review by Jill Johnston. As we see, this framework was equally important in shaping her criticism. Johnston writes: “But since there is no specified emotion, I believe that what you feel in the movement is the impact of a total action [...] It is Cunningham’s magic as a performer to make every action a unique and complete experience. The gesture is the performer; the performer is the gesture.”²²¹ In celebrating the moment of “total action” as the site of meaning and expression in Cunningham, Johnston speaks in the language of Harold Rosenberg. Furthermore, by positing “the performer as the gesture” and vice versa, she echoes Rosenberg’s analysis of the breakdown between art and life.

Rosenberg’s critical framework reappears repeatedly in dance writing about Cunningham. In Robert Coe’s analysis of Merce Cunningham in *Dance in America* (1985), for example, the author paraphrases the words of Harold Rosenberg and uses them to frame his analysis of Cunningham:

The ‘triumph of American painting’ was in the making, with the gestural energy of abstract expressionism transforming the artist’s canvas into an arena of spontaneous

²²⁰ Jill Johnston, “Two Reviews.” *The Village Voice* (1960-1963). Rpt. in *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time: Essays 1944-1992*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 32-35. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1992, 34.

²²¹ Johnston, “Two Reviews,” 35.

physicality. A painting was to be conceived as a field of action producing not a picture but an *event* informed by the artist's existential confrontation with the materials of craft. [...] Cunningham was also structuring dances to the rhythms, shapes, and momentum of the body alone.²²²

Coe uses Rosenberg's critical framework to celebrate the "spontaneous physicality" of Cunningham's choreography, thereby framing him in the tradition of Abstract Expressionism. It is interesting to note that Coe is also referencing Irving Sandler's "The Triumph of American Painting" (1970), which asserted an art historical trajectory in keeping with Rosenberg's ideas.²²³

As with Greenberg, Rosenberg's aesthetic ideas carried a pointed political agenda. In defining the Abstract Expressionists as "American Action Painters," he too, asserted a "great shift of focus" following World War II, from the artistic experiments in Paris to those of New York City. In drawing on the rhetoric of both Greenberg and Rosenberg, Johnston bolstered Cunningham's connection to contemporary discourse, thereby giving him resonance in the symbolic order. In doing so, she framed him as one of the most important American successors to the fallen tradition of European modernism—in other words, as the New America. By the 1960s, however, the moment of Abstract Expressionism's triumph had passed. Replaced first by Pop and soon after by the explosion of activity in the 1960s, Abstract Expressionism took its place in history. Thus, with their outdated language of "action" and "abstraction," the critics framed Cunningham, once again, as yesterday's avant-garde.²²⁴

²²² Robert Coe, *Dance in America*. New York: Dutton, 1985, 165.

²²³ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*.

²²⁴ Recent literature, and the work of Roger Copeland in particular, has declared the ultimate reversal of the early links between Cunningham and the Abstract Expressionists. Though the link to formalism is relevant, it pales in comparison to the larger fundamental similarities between Cunningham, Dada, and Neo-Dada. As Copeland writes, "The proposition that Cunningham is to Graham as Rauschenberg and Johns are to abstract expressionism seems almost too obvious to belabor; but it's a parallel that most dance writers consistently fail to acknowledge." Copeland goes on to analyze dance writing that links Cunningham to Abstract Expressionism. His analysis differs from my own in that it focuses on the 1980s, rather than on the earliest efforts to define Cunningham's aesthetic. Roger Copeland, *Merce Cunningham: the Modernizing of Modern Dance*. New York: Rutledge, 2004, 85.

Cunningham as Neo-Dada

While many critics pursued a link between Cunningham and the language of Abstract Expressionism, ultimately, the most resounding critical genealogy framed Cunningham, alongside the Pop experiments of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, as a purveyor of the “Neo-Dada.” Remy Charlip helped to cultivate this genealogical link after Cunningham’s first New York season (in the fall of 1953). In an article about Cunningham’s use of chance, written for *Dance Magazine*, Charlip wrote:

Experiments with chance have been made by musicians, poets, painters, and sculptors, surrealists and dadaists, well-known among whom are Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, and Kurt Schwitters. [...] For the dancer of today these stimuli freshly felt and used in accord with contemporary necessity open up a wide and fertile field of action. Not only do they free the choreographer from habitual ideas and the compulsions of personal likes and dislikes, but they present endless possibilities of movement in space-time that introduce one, whether on stage or in the audience, to a world beyond the imagination.²²⁵

Charlip, one of Cunningham’s first students in New York and at Black Mountain College was acting, in this context, both as artistic producer and critical promoter. In identifying Dada and Surrealism as the genealogical impetus of Cunningham’s chance aesthetic, Charlip simultaneously asserts the renewed vitality of these “freshly felt” ideas, by framing them as part of a larger “contemporary necessity.” Underlying his claim is the idea that chance with its “endless possibilities” constitutes a kind of timeless essence explored in different iterations by the artists of the avant-garde. Charlip situates Cunningham alongside Johns and Rauschenberg as Duchamp’s inheritor, and thus, part of the new generation of “avant-garde Masters.”²²⁶

²²⁵ Remy Charlip, “Composing by Chance,” 43.

²²⁶ For more on this subject see: Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985. Krauss explores the notion of repetition of the avant-garde artist in her seminal essay by the same name.

Hearing the explicit connection to Dada and Surrealism from a Cunningham dancer no doubt caught the critics' attention. In 1960, a reviewer who saw Carolyn Brown and Merce Cunningham perform in Germany during their brief European tour (arranged by Cage and his European music network) attempted to make sense of Cunningham's aesthetic in terms of his genealogy: "For the longest time the spectators did not know whether this was or was not meant to be taken seriously [...] But the last piece offered a solution [...] It was an [sic] hilarious Dada-act, and people who left during intermission missed the whole point of the performance."²²⁷ In making sense of the confusing question of Cunningham's seriousness, the critic frames his aesthetic as a contemporary correlate to Dada's tradition of theatrical absurdity. This critical perspective contributed to a growing archive; while the critics were rhetorically hinting at the links between Cunningham and Abstract Expressionism, they explicitly cited "Dada" as one of his primary genealogical precedents.

In the 1960s, American critics were attempting to make sense of a rapidly changing art world marked by an explosion of intermedial experiments. Within this context, Pop Art, and the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in particular, defined the symbolic center alongside Happenings, Fluxus, and the Judson Dance Theater. In 1963, Wilfred Mellers attempted to make sense of Cunningham's engagement within this proliferation of experimental activity. He writes: "[*Story*] consists of 'happenings,' executed, however, by dancers of great technical skills. While the result is Dadaistically hilarious, it's by no means only that."²²⁸ In the language of "happenings," Mellers carves out a distinct place for Cunningham in the contemporary discourse. On one hand, he asserts Cunningham's involvement in the explosion of

²²⁷ *Berliner Montagsecho*, October 3, 1960, rpt. in Carolyn Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 306.

²²⁸ Wilfrid Mellers, "Tranquility." *The New Statesman* (31 July 1964). Rpt. in *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time: Essays 1944-1992*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 35-36. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1992, 36.

temporal/spatial experiments; at the same time, however, he charts Cunningham's unwillingness to abandon "technical skill," thereby marking an important aesthetic distinction between Cunningham and the Judson Dance Theater. Lastly, in describing the dance as "Dadaistically hilarious," Mellers connects Cunningham's experiments to those of Rauschenberg and Johns. As the review suggests, Cunningham was a central subject in the critical effort to make sense of this complex moment.

In a series of critical essays in the 1960s, Barbara Rose characterized many of these experiments under the umbrella term, "Neo-Dada." The term embraced the Pop assemblage work of Rauschenberg and Johns, but also applied more widely to Happenings, Fluxus, Junk Art, French Nouveau Réalisme, and other contemporary experiments across media. Rose framed these artists as the aesthetic link between the experiments of Abstract Expressionism and Minimal Art. In her seminal essay, "A B C Art" (1965), she established Cunningham's centrality within this transitional moment. "Cunningham's activity too," Rose writes, "must be considered as having helped to shape the new sensibility of the post-Abstract-Expressionist generation."²²⁹ Suddenly, and for the first time, Cunningham was theoretically situated as the genealogy *builder*, and thus, central to the history of American modernism.

Time magazine followed one step behind Rose's critical discourse. In 1964 its writers asserted their own awareness of Cunningham as yesterday's avant-garde:

They certainly belong together. Choreographer Merce Cunningham believes that all movement is dance. Composer John Cage insists that all sound is music. Pop Artist Robert Rauschenberg thinks 'every object is as good as every other object.' But could they belong to derrière-garde London? After presenting 15 ballets in six performances at

²²⁹ Barbara Rose, "A B C Art," *Art in America*, (October-November 1965), Rpt in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gregory Battcock, 274-297. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1995, 280.

Sadler's Wells, the triarchy established itself as the most explosive event in British ballet since Martha Graham's London debut in 1954.²³⁰

The message of both scholarly and popular discourse was clear; Cunningham was established and already slipping into history. Rose signaled this shift by establishing him in a fixed genealogical framework. *Time*, on the other hand, measured it through popular acceptance, framing Cunningham's moment of "explosive" success abroad as a sign that he was becoming the outdated "derrière-garde." Though he continued to engage in innovative explorations of time, space, and movement, Cunningham was cast as a kind of historical precedent or link: a transition-maker, or paradigm-shifter. Despite the centrality of his engagement in the intermedial aesthetic discourse, the critics stripped Cunningham of his artistic vitality.

Cunningham as the New America

In his review of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's first New York Season at the Theatre de Lys, Anatole Chujoy expressed the widespread resistance to Cunningham's new aesthetic:

Merce Cunningham is a wonderful dancer and, when he wants to be, a sensitive choreographer [...] so one cannot say that he engages in fringe-esthetics because he cannot dance or choreograph. On the other hand, if his stage exercises in 'choreography by chance' are accepted as legitimate dance, then 'choreography by chance' must be accepted as a valid method of dance composition [...] This, frankly, we are not prepared to do.²³¹

In pointing to his critical unpreparedness in accepting Cunningham's radical chance aesthetic, Chujoy hit the mark. Writing on Cunningham in 1954, he was forced to make sense of revolutionary ideas that had not yet entered the critical framework. Without a genealogy in which to contextualize Cunningham's "choreography by chance," Chujoy interpreted these

²³⁰ *Time*, "Dance: Pop Ballet." August 14, 1964.

²³¹ Chujoy, Anatole. "Merce Cunningham and Company."

experiments as mere “fringe-aesthetics.” In less than twenty years, however, Cunningham’s experiments went from being attacked as radical, marginal, and iconoclastic to being critically framed as symbolic of the New America.

This critical shift is particularly remarkable when one considers that Cunningham couldn’t book a second New York season until 1968. Sporadic bookings meant minimal critical attention. Despite this challenge, Cunningham facilitated the development of a critical discourse on his work through lecture-demonstrations, essays, and the publication of his artist book, *Changes: Notes on Choreography*.²³² His articulated aesthetic helped to define a critical framework in which he was contextualized in relation to the mid-century modernism of Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Dada, and Pop. In the 1960s, America witnessed the explosion of intermedia experimentation in Happenings, Fluxus, and the Judson Dance Theater. In the wake of this proliferation, Cunningham (who had been engaged in almost every medium since 1948) was credited as initiating these post-modern experiments; he had become the genealogy builder.

In October of 1968, *The Saturday Evening Post* published an issue that exemplified this monumental shift. Its cover (fig. 3.5) features a mysterious close-up photograph of Cunningham’s painted face. With one side red, the other white, and black circles around his eyes, the image need hardly be subtitled “WHO IS THIS MAN [See page 40].” In the cover story, “Anything Can Follow Anything,” Donal Henahan positions Cunningham as the genealogy builder. “Such aesthetic notions no longer seem pointless jokes,” he writes, “What was once prophetic is now the very base and fiber of art for many painters, musicians, writers, filmmakers and dancers in the ‘60s.”²³³ Cunningham’s centrality in this issue reflects his enormous resonance in American culture. Once the marginal “iconoclast,” Cunningham was

²³² Merce Cunningham, *Changes: Notes on Choreography*.

²³³ Donal Henahan, “Anything Can Follow Anything.” *Saturday Evening Post* 241.21 (1968): 41.

suddenly the “base and fiber” of the contemporary generation. Included alongside American interest stories and the mass-market writing of Joan Didion, he was framed, as mainstream. In the tradition of Norman Rockwell’s popular illustrations for the same publication, Cunningham’s assertion that “anything can follow anything” was lionized as the basis for a contemporary American idiom. Suddenly, the “iconoclast” was the face of American popular culture and part of the common cultural currency.

As the earlier analysis of the operations of genealogy suggest, Cunningham’s moment of success was also the moment at which he began to slip into history. In the words of Carolyn Brown, “For Merce, the time between being the “enfant terrible” of the avant-garde and “acknowledged master” of the avant-garde was much like a New York spring—nonexistent.”²³⁴ Cunningham’s American vernacular was increasingly naturalized as (and by) tradition. In 1968, following a major society benefit party for Cunningham at Philip Johnson’s glass house, Jill Johnston laments the implicit contradiction in Cunningham’s “success:”

The paradox is that I’m as impressed as I am horrified. They must be too. Or maybe they just figure it for playing Robin Hood with the rich—a worthy activity. [...] What [Cunningham is] doing now is in essence no different from what he was doing when I first saw him in 1953 and later in 1957, when the message at last bowled me over and I understood what others had before me—that Merce was a one-man avant-garde oasis in a desiccated landscape of Graham cracker crumbs and other remnants of better days. So now in effect Merce is standing still doing what he does best [...] while many of us circle around him seeing it in part perhaps as great as it ever was and in part as belonging to an archaic tradition which a new generation has challenged. That’s the way it works I guess. After you’ve had your time to be bad you pass into the realm of the beautiful, you filter down into the elite, who stick you up on their walls, and call you immortal names, and make up a fucking history to go with it.²³⁵

Indeed, in 1968 Cunningham was pursuing the same kind of experimental investigations into space, time, and movement that he began when he left Martha Graham’s company in 1945. And

²³⁴ Carolyn Brown, Essay in *Merce Cunningham*, 31.

²³⁵ Jill Johnson, “Okay Fred,” *The Village Voice*, May 26, 1968, Rpt. in Jill Johnston, *Marmalade Me*. Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1998, 167.

yet at this moment, as Johnston laments, he was framed, immortalized, and assigned to a static history; no matter what he did, his contribution to twentieth century art was fixed. At the very moment when Cunningham was branded as the New America, the funding came through.

Chapter Four

Becoming an American Institution: Cunningham's Patronage

In the 1950s, American audiences and institutions were transfixed by Martha Graham; they whole-heartedly embraced her aesthetic of impassioned emotion, allegory, and narrative and they celebrated it as a reflection of American values. Merce Cunningham, in contrast, was a radical figure. His aesthetic overturned her established and coveted ideas and his community of marginal artist-types cast him outside the world of mainstream dance establishment. The support of these artists, however, changed the critical landscape for Cunningham. Around 1968, financial support and an institutional network of patronage followed.

Cunningham arrived at this moment through new and unconventional forms of patronage, which generated mounting accolades from abroad. His trajectory differed from the more traditional and “establishment” careers of figures such as Martha Graham or José Limón. Rather, Cunningham's more marginal and improvised path reflects a series of efforts and intentions (on the part of Cage and Cunningham) that resist the traditional narrative, but which propose, instead, a narrative of accident.

1950s: Informal tours and State Department applications

The 1950s can be characterized as a time of financial inconsistency and minimal performances for the Cunningham troupe. Although the company managed to book its opening season at the Theatre de Lys (1953), it was subsequently close to impossible for Cunningham to book a New York City season. He continued to teach in his Eighth Street studio and, with the help of Cage, he wrote to colleges and friends all over the country in search of any interest in master classes and performances. This approach proved somewhat successful, producing residencies at the University of Illinois in Champagne-Urbana, Illinois (1953, 1959), the

University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana (1956), and Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut (1958, 1960). Barely staying financially afloat, Cunningham applied for and received a fortuitous Guggenheim Fellowship in 1954, which helped him to pay the rent on his apartment and studio: “That Guggenheim saved my life,” he would later say.²³⁶

By 1955, Cunningham and Cage were desperate to find more stable sources of funding and were itching to tour abroad. In hopes of getting financial support towards this end, they applied for State Department support through the government’s new Cultural Presentations Program. President Dwight D. Eisenhower initiated the Program in 1954 when he requested five million dollars from Congress to fund the export of American culture abroad. That year, the President’s Emergency Fund for International Affairs was founded, according to President Eisenhower, “to stimulate the presentation abroad by private firms and groups of the best American industrial and cultural achievements, in order to demonstrate the dedication of the United States to peace and human well-being [and] to offset worldwide Communist propaganda charges that the United States [had] no culture.”²³⁷ Administered by the State Department, the fund designated the unprecedented sum of \$2,250,000 to be devoted specifically to the performing arts.²³⁸ A year later, the House of Representatives approved a continuation of the Emergency Fund, making it permanent legislation. Beginning with Eisenhower’s Emergency Fund, the Cultural Presentations Program would evolve over the course of the second half of the century and would eventually transform into the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities in 1965. A markedly Cold War initiative, the program was a central force in deciding which artists were supported and recognized abroad, but also at home. As Eisenhower’s

²³⁶ James Klosty, *Merce Cunningham*. New York: Saturday Review, 1975, 47.

²³⁷ President Eisenhower quoted in Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 11.

²³⁸ Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 11

statement suggests, this was an effort to illustrate the triumph of American freedom of expression.

The first choreographer to benefit from the Cultural Presentations Program (via Eisenhower's Emergency Fund) was José Limón, who was fully funded on a tour of Latin America, receiving \$35,400 from the government in November of 1954. In addition to being a fluent Spanish speaker, Limón was an appealing candidate based on his explicit interest in mining a distinctly American form of modern dance. Describing these intentions, Limón said: "Hemingway and Faulkner write in English, but they write like Americans. In the same way, we are trying to find a new language for American Dance."²³⁹ Towards this end, Limón developed a deeply expressive style that was based on his training at the Humphrey-Weidman studio in New York—which was, by this time, considered to be one of the most well respected homes of American modern dance. In the tradition of Martha Graham, Limón's idea of "American" modern dance appealed to the public's acceptance of narrative and overt expressivity; Limón, like Graham, offered a reflection of the American public's sense of normalized artistic practices. This was decidedly not the case with Merce Cunningham's emerging aesthetic. His "Americanness," if there, was much more ambiguous.

In this context, Cage and Cunningham became aware of the opportunity presented by the President's Emergency Fund and, within a year of its existence, they submitted their own application to the State Department, hoping to take the company on a performance tour in Asia.²⁴⁰ The Dance Panel, a committee composed of a series of "experts" in the field, considered Cage's and Cunningham's joint proposal (which also included composer David Tudor) in

²³⁹ Ibid., 24.

²⁴⁰ By this time, the House had approved a continuance of the program, which was transformed into permanent legislation in 1956.

February of 1955. The Dance Panel (like the Music and Drama panels) was established and administered by the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA), an outside organization that was contracted by the government in 1954 to assist the State Department with its Cultural Presentations Program. While the State Department was largely responsible for targeting specific countries and geographic areas to send the groups, the government felt that “only experts in each art form could make intelligent decisions about the best artists and groups that the United States should send abroad.”²⁴¹ Thus, it decided that the Panels would be responsible for choosing which artists would best represent American culture abroad.

In March of 1955, the esteemed members of the Dance Panel agreed to reject Cunningham and Cage in their application for funding. Before this, however, the Cage/Cunningham project had been approved by the Music Panel, backed, most likely, with the encouragement of Virgil Thomson, who was a good friend of both Cage’s and Cunningham’s. Nonetheless, when Cunningham’s application was up for consideration by the Dance Panel, the members deemed the work “too avant-garde and controversial.”²⁴² The archival meeting minutes also indicate that Lincoln Kirstein “felt that the company was boring.”²⁴³ According to Carolyn Brown, Cage reported to have “received a hideous [rejection] letter from ANTA, which he described as ‘very mean.’”²⁴⁴ Resilient and indignant, John Cage appealed the rejection in writing a month later, including letters expressing interest in hosting him in Asia. This seems to have swayed Kirstein who felt “they would have a considerable success in avant-garde groups in Germany, France, Italy, and Japan,” and recommended that Cage and Cunningham “play for

²⁴¹ Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 40.

²⁴² Meeting Minutes from the Dance Advisory Panel International Exchange Program: Feb 10, 1955, Group II, Manuscript Collection 468, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 134.

intellectual groups where they [had] been requested.”²⁴⁵ The topic was discussed briefly but tabled once again at the following meeting in September, in which Virgil Thomson, who was scheduled to come and speak on Cunningham’s behalf, could not make it due to some sort of misunderstanding concerning the meeting time.

Cunningham’s State Department application was laid to rest in October of 1955. Martha Hill, director of the Dance Department at Julliard, spoke most strongly against awarding funds to Cunningham and reportedly “felt that people who see Merce who have not seen Martha [Graham] will have a strange idea about American dance.”²⁴⁶ Furthermore, she believed, “John Cage is more representative of a musician than Merce is as a dancer. He is ‘way out on the fringes of American dance,’ and is confusing and abstract.”²⁴⁷ Hill’s characterization of Cunningham’s aesthetic as marginal and “abstract” reflects the degree to which it was still new and not fully understood. While Cage had a friendly connection to Virgil Thomson—a force of music world establishment—behind him, Cunningham was alone and without backing from the leaders of the foremost modern dance institutions.

The opposite was true for Martha Graham, the most established figure in the world of modern dance; the Panel was stacked with her friends and supporters from Bethsabée de Rothschild to Agnes de Mille. By 1955, Graham was not actively looking to benefit from the institutional support of the State Department; she was a well-respected and financially stable artist. While her revolutionary, expressive style had startled American audiences in the late 1920s and early 1930s, by the 1950s, it was celebrated as the foundation for a uniquely American art form. Capitalizing on her success, the members of the Dance Panel initiated a formal

²⁴⁵ Meeting minutes from the Dance Advisory Panel International Exchange Program: March 10, 1955.

²⁴⁶ Meeting minutes from the Dance Advisory Panel International Exchange Program: October 13, 1955.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

relationship with Graham, asking for her help in promoting American culture in Southeast Asia. These cultural efforts mirror America's leadership in the military occupation of Japan since 1945.

Like the decision to send José Limón to Latin America in 1954, the Panel's selection of Martha Graham for the Asia tour reveals the close ties between cultural diplomacy and foreign policy that were played out through the connection between the State Department and the ANTA Dance Panel. In the mid-1950s, the U.S. government feared Communism's tightening hold on the governments of Southeast Asia and designated the region as a diplomatic priority. The State Department and the Dance Panel hoped Graham could promote the triumph of American democracy to Communist-leaning Asian audiences. According to the Dance Panel meeting minutes, however, Graham was initially uninterested, and she hoped to return to Europe instead.²⁴⁸ As Naima Prevots describes in her book, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (1998), the panelists would not take Graham's initial "no" for an answer, and individually petitioned Graham to change her mind. The meeting minutes report: "Mr. Terry thinks that she [Graham] could be talked into going to the Orient, and he will speak to her about this. Everyone would like to see her there. Miss Hill said she will also try to persuade her."²⁴⁹ Ultimately, the Panel members' efforts were successful; between October of 1955 and February of 1956, Graham agreed to represent the American government abroad, performing in Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Malaya, Japan, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand.²⁵⁰

Graham's tour of Asia was widely publicized and by all accounts hugely successful. Satisfying the government's hopes and expectations, she announced "American" modernism

²⁴⁸ Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 44.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

through her original expression of narrative and inner emotion. Like Limón, Graham was “perceived as upholding the standard of high art in dance while also appealing directly to audiences.”²⁵¹ Importantly, her revolutionary accomplishment was “home-grown” and thus, offered a perfect example of American leadership in global spheres of culture. Graham openly incorporated other noticeably “American” elements into her work. She collaborated with American composer Aaron Copland, and she frequently incorporated spoken text from American literature; examples include The Declaration of Independence and the poetry of Walt Whitman.²⁵² Graham’s tour to Asia, during which she was an ambassador of American culture, was rife with Cold War commentary. For example, Theodore Streiber, head of the United States Information Agency, read the following excerpt from a Djakarta newspaper to the Committee on Foreign Affairs in March of 1956: “If ever this paper came perilously close to forgetting its policy of leaning neither to the East or to the West, it was during Martha Graham week, because this talented woman presented something of the United States that we could wholeheartedly approve of.”²⁵³ Thus, Graham’s overwhelmingly American” style announced a clear and impressive national aesthetic. Importantly, this aesthetic was one that appealed to mass audiences in the United States *and* abroad. In contrast, Cunningham’s aesthetic was radical and complex; the ways in which his aesthetic incorporated and reflected “Americanness” was much less clear. Perhaps most importantly, Cunningham had not yet been embraced by mass audiences, either abroad or at home. His community and audience were decidedly specialized, comprised of avant-garde visual artists, musicians, and other intellectuals.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 51.

²⁵² Ibid., 46.

²⁵³ Ibid., 50.

Despite the State Department rejection, Cunningham pulled together his first touring dates in the spring and summer of 1955. Through the 1950s and into the early 1960s, he and Cage pieced together commissions from university and college campuses, traveling with a loose pick-up company of five to ten dancers. At several points during these years, Cunningham struggled to sustain a cohesive “company,” however, he continually managed to pull himself out of financial crisis.²⁵⁴ In 1958, for example, Cunningham tried unsuccessfully to get theater bookings in New York City while Cage and his circle of musicians (including David Tudor and Earle Brown) traveled to Europe on a performance tour. Among the avant-garde musicians at Darmstadt (who were hosting the various stops on the European tour), Cage was very quick to discuss Cunningham and his work. Brown recalls: “when [Cage] received an invitation to perform he always suggested the possibility of a dance concert.”²⁵⁵ When Cage gathered enough interest, he immediately wrote to Carolyn Brown and Cunningham and told them to fly to Europe and accompany the musicians during their performances in Stockholm and Hamburg.²⁵⁶ Walter Terry, the dance critic for *The New York Herald Tribune*, noted Cunningham’s success on this tour during the Dance Panel meeting that took place in October of that year. The minutes report: “Mr. Terry commented that Mr. Cunningham was a great success in Stockholm with one dancer and John Cage, and was very well-received in a program of his own.”²⁵⁷ The minutes also point out the fact that “this [was] the same project that was submitted to the Dance Panel three years ago and turned down.”²⁵⁸ Cunningham’s connections to the music world and the networks that convened at Darmstadt (via Cage) generated some of his earliest performance opportunities in Europe and introduced his aesthetic to communities of avant-garde musicians in several

²⁵⁴ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 244.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 225.

²⁵⁶ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 112.

²⁵⁷ Meeting minutes from the Dance Advisory Panel International Exchange Program: Thursday, October 23, 1958.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

European cities. As we will see, the growing European interest in Cunningham among the continent's urban avant-garde would help to define Cunningham's unconventional structure of support.

Cage was not the only person generating Cunningham's contacts and support that year, however. When he returned from Europe, Cunningham received a second fortuitous Guggenheim fellowship on his own and was offered a position as the first dancer-in-residence at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.²⁵⁹ This residency, which included master classes, lecture demonstrations, and choreography seminars, was a first in that it clearly excluded John Cage. Thus, Cunningham went to the Midwest on his own while Cage remained in Europe, accepting a residency in Milan. During this time, Cage appeared as a mushroom expert on an Italian Television quiz show called *Lascia o raddoppia* (loosely *Double or Nothing*). Answering all of the questions correctly, he won first prize, collecting \$6,000 in winnings, which were then used to finance the Cunningham Company. While this may seem to be a random and perhaps irrelevant event, in fact it exemplifies the unconventional and "accidental" nature of Cunningham's funding sources until the 1970s. In the Cunningham Company's first twenty or so years, moments of institutional recognition such as the Guggenheim fellowship were few and far between. Because of this, Cunningham pursued funding through a variety of alternative routes; many of these, like the mushroom contest winnings, appeared almost random. As we will see, Cage's win was one event within a pattern-less series of "accidents" that would define Cunningham's funding trajectory. These moments of sporadic funding offer a sharp contrast to the traditional and continuous "narrative" of institutional funding that supported the dance establishment. While Graham and Limón received large sums of funding from the U.S.

²⁵⁹ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 244.

government, Cunningham and Cage received a small financial push from an Italian quiz show that was essentially unknown in the United States. Ironically, Cage became a minor celebrity in Italy that year.

Following Cunningham's residency at the University of Illinois, Cage returned from Europe; together, they used the quiz show winnings to purchase an old Volkswagen minibus. The VW became the company's famous novel touring vehicle throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, transporting the troupe across the country when dates and residencies materialized.²⁶⁰ According to David Vaughan, the bus "carried the six dancers, two musicians (Cage and David Tudor), the technical director (Robert Rauschenberg), and all the costumes and equipment."²⁶¹ As the description suggests, the group resembled a community of friends—the "network" from Chapter two—rather than a formalized company and their payment (or lack thereof) reflected their sense of common purpose and collective support. In those days, as Carolyn Brown recalls, "rarely was anything paid beyond a token fee [...] the dancers (and, of course, the choreographers) themselves subsidized modern dance."²⁶² The Cunningham troupe was still a long way from being a formalized "company" with regular performances and steady salaries. Through cross-country tours in the Volkswagen minibus, they sustained their free-spirited sense of community and cultivated an audience composed largely of artists and students.

Second Round Applications to the State Department

Cunningham re-applied to the Dance Panel in 1960 and 1961. In both cases, he was only requesting funding for transportation. In 1960, he was invited to perform in a festival in Berlin

²⁶⁰ Lloyd, 47.

²⁶¹ Vaughan, David. "Archives of the Dance: Building an Archive: Merce Cunningham Dance Company." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 2.1 (1984): 61-67.

²⁶² Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 56.

and in '61, he and Cage received invitations from India (through the Sarabhai family) and the Sogetsu Art Centre in Tokyo (through Toshi Ichiyanagi and Yoko Ono).²⁶³ The Dance Panel's decision to reject both of these applications seemed to rest on four key concerns: First, there was a general "objection [on the panel] to the prominence given to John Cage's music." The Panel members were terrified by the thought of Cage's experimental and electronic music shaping foreign audiences' ideas about American dance and she hoped that Cunningham "would come up with a project without [him]."²⁶⁴ On a related note, the Panel was certain that Cunningham's "work would stir up a lot of controversy." By the 1960's, the popular press was beginning to take note of Cunningham's radical aesthetic and unusual community. *Time* magazine, for example, dubbed Cunningham, "the most consistently daring experimenter in the field," and described his audience as a "crowd of beards, ponytails and beatminks."²⁶⁵ I assume the article should read "beatniks," rather than "beatminks," but the poor reporter was probably totally out of his/her element. This kind of attention aroused fear and skepticism in the minds of the Panel members about the integrity of Cunningham's experiments. The meeting minutes from 1961 reflect these sentiments: "the Dance Panel felt that this team no longer does what they set out to do years ago, and no longer believes in whatever art form they are trying to express. They are more interested in making newspaper copy now."²⁶⁶ Allegedly, the Panel believed that Cunningham's radical experiments were a superficial effort to earn popular attention, when ironically, "popularity," was not one of Cunningham's primary aims.

Third, while the Panel members could agree on Cunningham's "magnificent" technical skill, they concluded that "there [were] still some questions" in regards to Cunningham "as a

²⁶³ A Japanese Newspaper agreed to pay the operating costs during their time in Tokyo.

²⁶⁴ Meeting minutes from the Dance Advisory Panel International Exchange Program: Thursday, April 21, 1960.

²⁶⁵ *Time*, "Music: How Strange." February 29, 1960.

²⁶⁶ Meeting minutes from the Dance Advisory Panel International Exchange Program: Thursday, April 21, 1960.

choreographer, and as a representative of American dance.”²⁶⁷ Interestingly, the phrasing here seems to suggest that they took issue not only with Cunningham’s aesthetic, but also with what he represented as an individual. Perhaps this concern had something to do with the fact that Cunningham was part of a community that resisted normative American values. This forms the basis of Rebekah Kowal’s assertion that the Panel members’ objections to Cunningham “functioned as proxies for a generalized yet latent homophobia, couched in aesthetic terms.”²⁶⁸

Lastly, and again, related to *Time* magazine’s coverage of the Cunningham performance, the Panel concluded: “his artistic approach is beyond that of popular acceptance.”²⁶⁹ Thus, the Panel was unwilling to endorse Cunningham’s work as “American” without the signs of the work’s mass public appeal. They concluded by designating him as acceptable in cases of “a sophisticated audience such as Europe or Tokyo,” without offering him any financial support.²⁷⁰ This decision was a bit ironic, however, given the fact that in 1960 (when this comment was made) and in 1961, Cunningham was invited (and proposing) to perform for these exact types of “sophisticated” audiences (Berlin in 1960 and Tokyo in 1961). Somehow, no one on the Panel felt the need to point this out when the group concluded: “there is no spot for this company at this moment.”²⁷¹ This, despite the fact that Berlin and Tokyo were crucial targets for cultural diplomacy in the early 1960s. More importantly, however, the Cultural Presentations Program was more interested in presenting American dance to a broad, general public than in appealing to the small, “sophisticated” audiences that were actively supporting Cunningham. Thus, by 1961,

²⁶⁷ Meeting minutes from the Dance Advisory Panel International Exchange Program: Thursday, June 22, 1961.

²⁶⁸ Rebekah J. Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2010, 190.

²⁶⁹ Meeting minutes from the Dance Advisory Panel International Exchange Program: Thursday, September 19, 1961.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

Cunningham was still too marginal for the Dance Panel; it was clear that he would have to look elsewhere for substantial funding.

1964 and the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts

Around this time, the infrastructure for funding in New York City and in the rest of the United States was gradually evolving. In 1960, The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) was formed with backing from Nelson Rockefeller and in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed The National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, an “umbrella” for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Naima Prevots explains: “Passage of the NEA and NEH legislation in 1965 signaled new recognition and acknowledgment of our [American] choreographers, composers, playwrights, painters, sculptors, and writers.”²⁷² Furthermore, she writes, “Eisenhower’s Emergency Fund [where Cunningham’s funding story, in a sense, began] had sown the seeds for a harvest.”²⁷³ This moment of enormous development of the mechanisms for funding for the arts presented enormous opportunity to artists like Cunningham. Still, it would take until the late 1960s and early 1970s before Cunningham would reap the benefits of these changes.

In the summer of 1961, John Cage, approached Lewis Lloyd (b.1938), the wife of one of Cunningham’s dancers (Barbara Lloyd) and asked if he would become the Merce Cunningham Dance Company’s Producer. In an effort to build an audience, Cage wanted to arrange a Broadway season for Cunningham; he knew that Lloyd had been producing a musical off Broadway that summer. Lloyd recalls, “[Cage] said, too, that the reason he had come to talk to

²⁷² Prevots, Naima. "Funding for Dance," 101.

²⁷³ Ibid.

me was because I was almost, ‘a part of the family.’”²⁷⁴ Simultaneously, Cage, with help from Jasper Johns, was organizing another side of the Cage/Cunningham family, establishing the nonprofit corporation, the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Inc. (now called the Foundation for Contemporary Art). In 1963, its founding directors were John Cage, Lew Lloyd, Elaine deKooning, David Hayes (an American sculptor), and Jasper Johns. Fundamentally, each believed in artists supporting other artists, which became the central principle behind the Foundation’s fundraising. Furthermore, the founders were largely motivated by Cunningham’s financial difficulty in particular. The first fundraiser was launched in 1963 at the Allan Stone Gallery (at Madison and Eighty-sixth street) and featured the sale of donated paintings and sculpture by seventy-eight artists including Joseph Cornell, Marcel Duchamp, Phillip Guston, Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns, Willem de Kooning, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Lippold, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Iasmu Noguchi, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, Mark Rothko, George Segal, Frank Stella, Jean Tinguely, and Andy Warhol. These names reflect Cunningham’s close ties to New York’s established and emerging “avant-garde” communities and his growing association with the “who’s who” in the contemporary art world. In the Foundation’s first press release, Jasper Johns announced the impulse behind its formation: “If performers are to function with any sense of freedom and if the public is to be able to see such work, some kind of subsidy is necessary. The response of the artists to this idea reflects involvement on levels of ideas and friendship between painters and sculptors and performers in dance, music and theatre.”²⁷⁵ The creation of the Foundation was an act of mutual legitimization.

²⁷⁴ Lloyd, 48.

²⁷⁵ Press release from The Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Inc, September 19, 1963, Series IV, The Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation Inc. Records, (S)*MGZMD 196, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

The visual artists endorsed and thus, legitimized Cunningham's aesthetic by funding it and they did so because, in many ways, Cunningham's aesthetic "reflected" and legitimized their own.

The Foundation's first fundraiser at the Allan Stone Gallery was quite successful. Together, the paintings and sculptures sold for \$45,000 and it was determined that this money would be used to fund Cunningham's planned Broadway season.²⁷⁶ When the arrangements for the season had to be pushed back due to a newspaper strike and resulting booking jam, Cunningham and company took the minibus on another west coast tour, during which their plans changed once again. Cage and Cunningham decided to abandon the Broadway plans and apply the funds raised through the Foundation sale to a World Tour. Thus, the funding that they had requested from the U.S. government to tour abroad, came instead, from Cunningham's circle of artist friends. Rejected by the establishment of ANTA's Dance Panel, Cunningham was supported, instead by the alternative community of avant-garde artists, which he had been cultivating at Black Mountain College and in Greenwich Village for almost twenty years. Acknowledging the solidification of this relationship between Cunningham and the visual artists, *Dance Magazine* reported: "the admiration is mutual," and yet, the questions remained: "As for the general audience – what will be its response? Is a "commercial" success a possibility?"²⁷⁷

The \$45,000 that was raised during the Foundation sale was not enough to fund the entire world tour, which was estimated to cost approximately \$80,000. Furthermore, the tour had now expanded to include trips to several additional countries and regions and the sponsors in India and Japan had agreed to fund the expenses only in those two countries. Several individuals supplemented the amount raised by the sale, including Betty Freeman, one of Cage's financial supporters, Judith Peabody, a New York socialite and philanthropist (who was actively involved

²⁷⁶ Lloyd, 48.

²⁷⁷ Lydia Joel, "Paintings for Sale: Profits for Performers." *Dance Magazine* XXXVII.3 (March 1963): 44.

in supporting American Ballet Theater and Dance Theater of Harlem), and American architect Philip Johnson. Still needing to raise a large sum of money, John Cage offered to sell a sculpture by Richard Lippold (a friend from the collaborative summers at Black Mountain College). A woman named Mary Hayes Sisler, the mother of Hartford Atheneum curator, Sam Wagstaff, purchased the sculpture for \$20,000, all of which went directly to the company.²⁷⁸ Cunningham and Company then received a second sum of \$20,000 from the John D. Rockefeller III Fund, which was initiated “though the interest of the Fund’s director, Porter McCray.”²⁷⁹ Lastly, Robert Rauschenberg contributed enormous financial support, selling his paintings at the last minute and advancing large amounts of cash to the company over the course of the tour. Additionally, Rauschenberg’s successes throughout the tour—at the Venice Biennale in particular—contributed to the company’s high profile, generating interest and, as a result, additional bookings. The absence of support from the State Department’s Cultural Presentations Program and American embassies abroad continued throughout the tour. As Lewis Lloyd recalls, “the lack of support annoyed us all, and Cage particularly went out of his way to be critical of the government cultural exchange program during press conferences.”²⁸⁰ Both Lloyd and Vaughan go as far as to suggest that it was perhaps the lack of assistance from the American government (and Cage’s vociferousness on the matter) that made the Czech government willing to host the company during the world tour. This assertion reflects the underlying Cold War issues at play. Throughout the tour, Cunningham was embraced by some as a symbol of American freedom of expression, despite—and in this case because of—the government’s lack of support.

²⁷⁸ Lloyd, 49.

²⁷⁹ Lloyd, 49.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

The tour was a huge undertaking, and required significantly more organization and foresight than the Volkswagen minibus tours of the 1950s and early '60s. As a result, the company had to undergo a few structural changes. For one, as Vaughan writes, "the old system, whereby Cunningham himself pocketed the fee check and then paid everyone's expenses, would not work."²⁸¹ Because of this, Cunningham's accountant advised him to incorporate himself; when he did, The Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation was formed. Another addition on the tour was the assistance of two administrators: Lewis Lloyd, who had been hired to produce the abandoned Broadway season and David Vaughan, who had been working as the company's secretary, writing letters to as many people as possible in an attempt to get bookings.

These institutional changes, combined with the major international success of the 1964 tour, marked a new beginning for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, but they simultaneously signaled the end of the days of informal tours in the Volkswagen minibus. During and after the world tour, the way the company was organized became increasingly formalized. Lloyd writes: "On the long tour, for the first time, unemployment insurance coverage had been provided for everyone. Back in New York, an agreement was made with a concert booking office, and the management of the company, such as it was, undertook the development of a more or less continuous supervision of the studio, the company, and the supporting nonprofit corporation, Cunningham Dance Foundation, Inc."²⁸² Though there was not much that he could do to avoid this structural evolution, Cunningham was resistant to it. In 1965, when Lloyd began negotiating with the dancers' union to work out a basic contract, he recalled: "Cunningham himself didn't care for this sort of institutionalization for what had been a very informal

²⁸¹ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 134.

²⁸² Lloyd, 50.

structure.”²⁸³ This reluctance suggests that perhaps Cunningham understood that his company’s informal marginality was an important part of his artistic persona and of what was driving his alternative structure of support. The growing pressure to formalize the company and its administration created a tension for Cunningham: between the institution he was gradually becoming (and institutional support he needed) and the marginal informality he was gradually leaving behind.

Despite the company’s growing “institutionalization,” they continued to be denied funding from the State Department. Still, the highly reported successes of 1964—particularly in London and Paris—brought greater attention to the company for American audiences and institutions, nudging them to pay attention to Cunningham’s experiments. For Cunningham, the support from the Foundation for Contemporary Performing Arts offered a distinct institutional alternative to the Cultural Presentations Program and other establishment funding mechanisms, one that reflected his unique marginality. At this point, Cunningham’s alternative community and funding structure linked him to a growing circle of international patrons and supporters, one that would put increasing pressure on the United States to recognize the seriousness and importance of his experiments.

1966-1967

Despite the success of the 1964 World Tour, Cunningham’s applications for funding through the Cultural Presentations Program were rejected once again in 1966. Without government support, the company went ahead (independently and with minimal funding) with its second European tour, which came about through the interest of painter Joan Miró, who had seen

²⁸³ Ibid., 51.

the company perform in Paris in 1964. Miró hoped that the company would perform in Spain (his native country) and offered to pay its airfare to and from Europe through the sale of one of his paintings. Following suit, the Canadian painter, Jean-Paul Riopelle, who was sharing a studio with Miró in the South of France, donated a painting to support the French portion of the European tour.²⁸⁴ Though seemingly random, the support of these painters reflects a kind of “mutual legitimization” similar to that of the artists behind the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts and the Allen Stone Gallery sale in 1964. In the cases of Miró and Riopelle, however, the meaning behind the financial support is slightly different. One might speculate that Miró, an anti-fascist, was eager to present Cunningham in Franco’s Spain as a symbol of artistic freedom. For both artists, Cunningham’s aesthetic certainly offered a legitimization of their own in that it reflected their experiments in chance and abstraction. In other words, Cunningham’s aesthetic brought new vitality to their “established” ideas. While Cunningham was reanimating the ideas and earlier spirit of these “modern masters,” they too, lent Cunningham a very specific form of legitimacy by strengthening his ties to France’s “arts establishment,” so to speak.

During the tour, Cunningham’s ongoing affiliation with this community was perhaps most visible during his performance at the Fondation Maeght, the museum of modern art founded in 1964 in Saint-Paul de Venice in the south of France. Carolyn Brown recalls her experience rehearsing “in the storage room in the midst of Calder mobiles and stabiles, and racks of paintings by Léger, Miró, and Kandinsky.”²⁸⁵ The performance took place within a courtyard that was decorated with sculptures by Alberto Giacometti (fig. 4.1).²⁸⁶ In a similar vein, Brown describes the audience as “a galaxy of art-world luminaries— Miró, Max Ernst, Dorothea

²⁸⁴ Jean Paul Riopelle, Gilbert Erouart, and Fernand Séguin. *Riopelle in Conversation*. Concord, Ont.: House of Anansi, 1995, 63.

²⁸⁵ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 474.

²⁸⁶ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 154.

Tanning, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Josép Luis Sert, and many others. Musician-composer friends [...] were there too, along with some of French society's elegantly coiffed, luxuriously furred ladies and their escorts."²⁸⁷ By this time, Cunningham's elite European following was expanding. After the major successes of the 1964 World Tour, and the return to Europe in 1966, Cunningham was particularly well connected to the art worlds of France and England. Support for his work in Europe was not limited to communities of visual artists, however. Unlike in the United States, Cunningham was becoming well respected among the European "dance establishment." This was made quite clear in 1966, when he was awarded the gold star for choreography at the Paris International Dance Festival.

The "gold star" award was a highly important accolade for Cunningham; it announced to the American public and perhaps more importantly, to the Dance Panel, that Cunningham's aesthetic was beginning to gain traction and relevance among a discerning, sophisticated, European audience. This resonated with the enormous insecurity among American institutions concerning their sense of inferiority to the European "tastemakers."²⁸⁸ To that end, the award signaled the possibility of Cunningham's lasting legacy, and it put pressure on American institutions to acknowledge this possibility. This growing pressure becomes clearly evident if we trace the transmission of the news of Cunningham's award from the accounts of a Cunningham Company member to dance critic to Dance Panel member, and finally, to an American Ambassador.

The story of Cunningham's receipt of the award is recounted in the writings of several of its company members, including Lewis Lloyd's essay on the history of Cunningham's funding,

²⁸⁷ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 474.

²⁸⁸ For more on this subject see: Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

David Vaughan's *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* and Carolyn Brown's *Chance and Circumstance*. Brown, for example, writes:

David Vaughan went to Paris to accept the award on Merce's behalf. When he arrived he was prevented from receiving it and informed that someone from the American Embassy would accept it. The gold star would then be sent to Washington, and from there it would be sent to Merce, which indeed it was. The package arrived in the mail, forty cents postage due.²⁸⁹

Clive Barnes—a British dance critic who supported Cunningham in his reviews during the London performances of the 1964 world tour and who moved to the U.S. a year later to write for the *New York Times*—recounted this story in his article, “Dance: Paradox of a Successful Tour.” “Although Merce Cunningham won the golden star for choreography in this international contest, he and his dancers have returned to New York with debts amounting to \$15,00.40.”²⁹⁰ He proceeded to explain the additional forty-cent charge with a tone of incredulous disbelief. In the same article, Barnes challenged the State Department on their reasons for not supporting Cunningham, and reported: “the Governmental advisers in this instance did not feel that ‘There was much interest in Cunningham’s kind of thing in Europe.’”²⁹¹ He concludes, condescendingly, “This is, at the very least, a fascinating opinion.”²⁹² This controversial quote became the subject of a desperate exchange recorded in a Department of State “Memorandum of Conversation” from the same date, which records to anxieties of Dance Panel member Nancy Lassalle, the director of Balanchine’s School of American Ballet:

Mrs. Lassalle called today to say how distressed she was to read Clive Barnes’ article on the treatment the Merce Cunningham Dance Company received from the State Department when abroad. She said in view of the feelings of the Dance Panel about the company, and the enormous interest in the Cunningham company abroad, especially in England and France, it is ‘blatantly wrong’ and ‘irresponsible’ to quote a Government

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 484.

²⁹⁰ Clive Barnes, “Dance: Paradox of a Successful Tour.” *The New York Times* [New York] 5 Jan. 1967: 28.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

official as saying “the Government advisors in this instance did not feel that ‘there was much interest in Cunningham’s kind of thing in Europe.’” Mrs. Lassalle believes that the Dance Panel might be considered in a poor light and hopes that the Department can set the record straight.²⁹³

Lassalle’s complaint provoked the State Department to request a report (via priority airogram) on Cunningham’s performances in France from the American Embassy in Paris. Ambassador Bohlen, who wrote the report, concludes by saying that negative critical responses to Cunningham represent “a slim minority opinion,” whereas, “The overwhelming critical consensus was that Cunningham’s ‘Dance of the Future’ has an assured place in modern dance.”²⁹⁴

Like the collective fundraising of the Foundation for Performance Arts and the popular success of the 1964 World Tour, the news of Cunningham’s gold star award put visible pressure on the government (but also, more generally, the American dance establishment) to acknowledge the legitimacy and importance of Cunningham’s work. The intervention on the part of Barnes (who was, if we recall, a *British* critic) made a real impact in terms of the Dance Panel’s inability to turn a blind eye to Cunningham’s success in Europe. As we will see shortly, this pressure would factor in to the Panel’s decisions in reviewing Cunningham’s subsequent applications for funding. Cunningham’s spheres of support were broadening and it was becoming more and more difficult for the establishment figures of the Dance Panel to refuse him monetary assistance.

As the earlier statement from Barnes suggests, the company incurred major debts following the 1966 European tour. Barnes reported that the figure was approximately \$15,000, Calvin Tomkins suggests it was around \$17,000, and Lewis Lloyd writes that it was closer to

²⁹³ Department of State Memorandum of Conversation between Beverly Gerstein, Panel Officer and Nancy Lassalle, member of the Dance Panel, January 5, 1967, Group II, Manuscript Collection 468, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection.

²⁹⁴ Department of State Airgram no. A-1055. Unclassified. To the Department of State. From the French Embassy, Group II, Manuscript Collection 468, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection.

\$20,000.²⁹⁵ The distinction is relatively insignificant. What does matter, however, is *how* the company recovered from its highly publicized debt.

In the summer of 1967, Judith Blinke, the company's booking agent, along with Wilder Green, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, organized a benefit party and performance that was hosted by Philip Johnson and the art patrons, Dominique and John de Menil, at Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. For this glamorous celebration of American modernism—a “benefit” for both the artists and the culturally-aware attendees—Cunningham prepared a thirty-minute excerpt from a new work titled *Scramble* (fig. 4.2), which the company performed on an outdoor stage constructed for the event to an “aural picnic” of experimental music composed and performed by John Cage, David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, and Toshi Ichiyanagi.²⁹⁶ The “entertainment” for the evening was a concert (that followed the dance performance) by Andy Warhol's group, The Velvet Underground. Carolyn Brown recalls the evening as “a society occasion covered gleefully by *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Women's Wear Daily*, with (highly staged) photographs of some of the four hundred ‘beautiful people’ and a politician or two, including Senator Jacob Javits [who helped to establish the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965], strolling around Mr. Johnson's estate with glasses in their hands.”²⁹⁷ Each of the nearly four hundred guests paid a seventy-five dollar ticket, which totaled almost \$24,000, more than enough to cover the company's debt.²⁹⁸ This was perhaps the first time that a Cunningham event was featured in the society pages, a clear sign of its new-found glamour. At the same time, the benefit announced the marginal or alternative aspect of the company's identity through the choice of The Velvet Underground and its canonical modernist

²⁹⁵ Lloyd, 53.

²⁹⁶ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 272.

²⁹⁷ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 492.

²⁹⁸ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 273.

identity through the association with its modernist environment. In the context of the 1960s movements in counterculture and social revolution, the “alternative” was increasingly embraced by the mainstream. That Philip Johnson helped to orchestrate the benefit reflected for one, Cage’ and Cunningham’s belief in the value of artists supporting other artists, and also, to some extent, a sense of aesthetic affinity between them. More importantly, this spectacle for American glamour was the symbolic stage on which its organizers promoted Cunningham through public affiliation. The combined successes of the 1966 European tour, the gold star award, and Philip Johnson’s benefit party strengthened Cunningham’s in the construction of an American “power” vanguard and helped to propel Cunningham and the company into the relative stability and institutional support of 1968.

1968: Brooklyn, Colorado, Rio de Janeiro and Beyond

During a residency at the State University of New York and Buffalo State University College from February to March of 1968, Cunningham choreographed two of his most iconic dances. *Rainforest* (fig. 4.3), featured Andy Warhol’s *Silver Clouds* (1966), mylar pillows filled with helium that floated freely all over the stage, and *Walkaround Time* (fig. 4.4) featured screen-printed plastic inflatable boxes of Marcel Duchamp’s *The Large Glass* (1915-1923).²⁹⁹ Jasper Johns facilitated both of these collaborations, but they also stemmed from Cunningham’s relationship with Warhol (and interest in his *Pillows*, specifically) and even stronger relationship with Marcel and Teeny Duchamp. As we saw in the previous chapter, Cunningham’s aesthetic incorporated Dada ideas as early as his days at Black Mountain College; he continued to experiment with related ideas (in this case in a more formal *homage*) throughout the 1960s.

²⁹⁹ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 163-164.

While Andy Warhol might still have been considered somewhat avant-garde, Duchamp represented an established aesthetic or prevailing reference point for the post-war avant-garde (artists like Warhol).

Cunningham's institutional support was gradually beginning to catch up with his backing from contemporary artists; 1968 marked four significant triumphs in this regard. To begin, Lloyd identifies the "most important development" of the year as being "the creation of the first, modest, annual salary for Merce Cunningham."³⁰⁰ Since the company's first summer at Black Mountain College in 1953, Cunningham had consistently given up a salary in order to support his dancers and other collaborators. Like the transition away from the Volkswagen minibus, this change marked a shift away from the early informality of the Cunningham troupe and towards the emerging institutionalism of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.³⁰¹

The second of these accomplishments was announced in July: a Rockefeller Foundation grant of \$20,000, which sponsored a four-week residency program at the University of Colorado, Boulder.³⁰² *Dance magazine* reported: "The residency [...] includes 2 concerts, 2 lecture-demos. By the dancers, technique classes, and a seminar in choreography headed by Cunningham."³⁰³ The format followed the residencies that Cunningham had organized on his minibus tours since the early 1950s. However, in this case, he was comfortably funded and able to engage with the school for an extended period of time. *Dance Magazine*, perhaps the most widely-read publication on dance news, however, was still unable to understand the nature of Cage's involvement in the work. Their report on Cunningham's awarded funding explained: "Cage will

³⁰⁰ Lloyd, 52.

³⁰¹ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 62.

³⁰² The Rockefeller Foundation, *President's Five-Year Review & Annual Report 1968*, accessed December 20, 2011, <http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/uploads/files/1496d619-017d-4b13-8a64-fce8ed4f785d-1968.pdf>.

³⁰³ *Dance Magazine*, "Rockefeller Grant Aids Cunningham Co." July 1968, 4.

lead what he rather cryptically calls ‘inter-disciplinary field trips,’” clearly unsure about what to make of this description.³⁰⁴ Thus, despite Cunningham’s mounting accolades and growing support from modern artists, he still faced resistance and speculation among the world of dance “establishment.”

That year, Cunningham also received a large grant from the Ford Foundation, which was awarded to support a residency and two-week season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). The grant, which amounted to \$485,000, was divided among seven modern dance companies that were selected by BAM’s manager, Harvey Lichtenstein, for twenty-five weeks of performances, produced over the course of a year and a half at the BAM and the Billy Rose Theatre on Broadway. In addition to the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Lichtenstein chose to present the Martha Graham Company, Paul Taylor Company, the Alwin Nikolais Company, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, The Glen Tetley Company, and the José Limón Company.³⁰⁵ When asked about how this group of companies was selected, Lichtenstein said, “We decided those were the most outstanding, the most established companies [...] If we can prove there is an audience for those companies, their success will give us a basis for more experimental things. Eventually there would be other, younger groups involved.”³⁰⁶

Lichtenstein’s commitment to promoting “younger,” “experimental things,” may have stemmed from his experience as a student at Black Mountain College in 1952. Carolyn Brown relays: “At Black Mountain in 1952, Harvey’s love affair with modern art and the heady ideas of the avant-garde took wing, and it was there that he first met and studied with Merce.”³⁰⁷ Lichtenstein had belonged to Cunningham’s marginal community and network of artists at Black Mountain

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Henahan, Donal, “Anything Can Follow Anything.” *Saturday Evening Post* 241, no. 21 (1968): 40.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 526-7.

College and had managed to bring the school's commitment to experimental art to his job at BAM, one of the most prestigious cultural institutions in New York City. Here we see Cunningham's alternative network taking a central (and powerful) place in American culture, seemingly by chance. Like Lichtenstein, Cunningham was beginning to move into the realm of New York Institutions.

The fact that Lichtenstein seems, in this case, to be grouping Cunningham with the "established," rather than the "experimental," speaks to one of Cunningham's greatest challenges. As the *Walkaround Time* and *Rainforest* collaborations suggest, the community of visual artists surrounding him (including the BMC and Eighth Street crowd) believed, by 1968, in the legacy of Cunningham's "established" ideas, and yet, Cunningham had not yet "proven" that he could attract a broad audience. The general public still considered Merce Cunningham to be marginal and avant-garde, someone who appealed only to a specialized, intellectual crowd. Lichtenstein was attempting to cultivate a New York audience for Cunningham, an artist who was, in his mind, "established," but who, paradoxically, had not been given a New York season since 1953 (at the Theatre de Lys). Cunningham's aesthetic may not have offered the narrative safety of Graham's or Limón's, however, as the criticism reveals, the 1960s were calling for something new and more relevant. Furthermore, as Carolyn Brown writes, "being on Broadway was equivalent to making it: it meant *real* success, as opposed to merely artistic success."³⁰⁸ The engagement brought Cunningham's aesthetic to midtown and allowed him to continue to broaden his audience.

While the Ford Foundation grant helped Cunningham to foster a more general audience in New York, he was still interested in strengthening his international presence. Thus in 1968,

³⁰⁸ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 528.

Cunningham applied once again to the State Department, hoping to be awarded a grant for a performance tour in Latin America. That year, Martha Graham received \$181,000 from the Cultural Presentations Program; Anna Sokolow and Anthony Tudor were each awarded \$10,000; and Merce Cunningham was awarded a mere travel subsidy of \$5,000 that was used toward performances in Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Caracas. While this moment is significant in that it is the first time the company received funding from the Cultural Presentations Program, it reflects a conservative reluctance to support a company that was beginning to receive enthusiastic institutional support from almost every other corner of the art world. In 1968, Cunningham was still too risky for the Panel, particularly in Latin America, which the government considered to be a region of political instability and upheaval. Instead, the tour was funded, in large part, by the Mexican government, which hosted seven Cunningham performances at the Palacio de las Bellas Artes as part of the XIX Cultural Olympics.³⁰⁹ Funds for the rest of the tour were pieced together with the help of Frank Stella, who designed a poster that he sold to raise money to cover the tour's expenses.³¹⁰ Lloyd writes: "The estimated loss for the tour had been planned at about \$20,000; it ended up larger than that."³¹¹

Despite these losses, the Latin American tour created a new discourse around the Cunningham aesthetic, establishing it as an expression of collective freedom that resonated with Cold War ideology. The unavoidable political backdrop of the tour came to light most poignantly in Rio de Janeiro: "In 1968 Brazil was governed by a 'soft' military dictatorship and Lew [Lloyd] upon arrival in Rio, was informed that unless the company provided the 'police censors'

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 512.

³¹⁰ Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, 166.

³¹¹ Lloyd, 53.

with a special preview on the afternoon of the opening, we could not perform.”³¹² In an explicit act of American freedom, Cage and Cunningham refused these requests. In a highly publicized press conference that followed the first performance, Cunningham remarked:

Our art is an artistic process and not an experience of something definite....The dance we perform is realistic, but not naturalistic; in our presentations we do not protest against war or other problems of humanity, but we reject all censorship of theatre by all governments, in whatever form, accepting only the censorship or critique of the public.³¹³

Furthermore, according to Brown, “John’s belief in anarchy, i.e. Thoreau’s ‘The best government is no government at all, and Merce’s belief that art transcends politics with its power to open/change people’s minds, was clearly articulated by them” over the course of the tour.³¹⁴

Reporters pushed Cunningham on his commitment to political freedom. One asked, “How could the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, as a symbol of artistic freedom, have accepted money from the United States government for this Latin American tour?”³¹⁵ Though a record of his response is unavailable, Cunningham later remarked, “I realized [on the tour] that John was involuntarily supporting the American Government, because here he was, allowed by the American Government to speak about getting rid of government.”³¹⁶

The eruption of articles that followed these performances was colored with politicized characterizations of Cunningham’s aesthetic that evoke the Cold War circumstances of the tour. The Rio de Janeiro newspaper called *Correio de Manhã* reported: “Liberty means purity in art as in life: the absence of extrinsic motives to the practiced act. The pure dance of Merce Cunningham creates plastic images that have their own law, order and internal logic of structure

³¹² Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 512.

³¹³ Ibid., 515.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 162.

but which only really seek to externalize the specific language of movement.”³¹⁷ A report from *Ultima Hora* called Cunningham’s performance “A Summary of American culture,” continuing, “The dance, the oldest means of communication between men, is today in the vanguard of artistic creation in the United States. Without a doubt this art that comes from New York is a Made in U.S.A. phenomenon, a cybernetic voo-doo, the authentic folklore of the Megalopolis.”³¹⁸ The Latin American critics understood Cunningham’s aesthetic as a distinct embodiment of American ideals, a fact that is somewhat ironic when one considers first, the lack of mainstream recognition of Cunningham among American audiences and second, the Dance Panel’s repeated failure to see Cunningham as representative of American dance. Within the political landscape of Latin America, and its highly politicized, radical movements and calls for freedom, Cunningham was understood and celebrated as representing a utopian notion of art, one that was very much connected to life itself. The Latin American celebration of Cunningham’s expression of American values was the final accolade, which pushed the American government to formally recognize and support Cunningham’s work. This recognition came three years later.

The highlights of the Latin American critics’ analyses of Cunningham as an ambassador of American “free dance” are included in the American Embassy reports from Rio de Janeiro, Caracas, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires. Numerous additional press clippings accompany the reports, with headlines such as “*Merce Cunningham Dance com liberdade total*” (“Dance with total freedom”), “*Balle para povo*” (Ballet for people), and “*Merce Cunningham danca e bale come inteira liberdade*” (“Merce Cunningham and ballet with full freedom”).³¹⁹ Though recordings of the Dance Panel conversations that immediately followed these reports are not

³¹⁷ Letter from American Embassy in Rio de Janeiro to the Department of State, July 15, 1968, Group II, Manuscript Collection 468, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

available, it is safe to conclude that the critical response (and celebration of Cunningham) played an important role in the State Department's perception of Cunningham and his legacy. In 1971, Cunningham was selected to tour Europe, by himself, "conducting classes and seminars as a Department of State 'Specialist,'" a United States Information Agency (USIA) exchange program administered by the State Department.³²⁰ Following this government recognition and award, Cunningham began generating enough support from New York funding institutions to be, for the first time, financially stable.

Later in 1971, Cunningham was awarded, \$50,000, the first of many large grants from the New York State Council on The Arts (founded in 1960). A year later, the Dance Panel awarded Cunningham with his second State Department grant of \$9,000 to support his performances in Eastern Europe. In 1973, Cunningham received even broader institutional support with large grants from the State Department's Cultural Presentations Program, now the National Endowment for the Arts (\$22,240), the Rockefeller Foundation (\$15,000), and The New York State Council on the arts (\$2,000). From 1973 until the company's dissolution in 2011, the company consistently generated this kind of institutional support, holding a place at the center of the New York (and American) dance and art worlds.

Conclusion

Between 1953 when the Merce Cunningham Dance Company was formed and when the troupe finally reached financial stability, Cunningham cultivated a new support mechanism that suited his marginal identity. Before him, Martha Graham, the archetypal member of the "dance establishment," had intentionally pursued a traditional, established path, one that appealed to her

³²⁰ Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, 561.

overt expression of “Americanness.” This was simply not possible for Cunningham, given his attenuated relationship to the dance “establishment.” His funding path was just as “intentional” as Graham’s (in other words, he was just as driven to be successful and to receive institutional support) and yet, his intentionality was diverted when he was rejected from institutional funding. Instead, Cunningham cultivated a series of non-traditional funding sources, pursuing new forms of patronage and new communities of patrons. His expanding networks in international capitals such as New York, Paris, Tokyo, and Rio de Janeiro, and his building accolades of success in these cities finally coalesced in the early 1970s to propel him into New York’s institutional center. While Graham’s funding trajectory follows a kind of straightforward narrative, Cunningham’s resists this tradition, offering a more random, non-sequential anti-narrative instead. Like his radical non-narrative aesthetic, Cunningham’s system of patronage defied the establishment pattern that was laid out by his modern dance predecessors. In the absence of institutional support, Merce Cunningham turned to sociability and aesthetic affiliation as the basis of his alternative support structure; in doing so, he negotiated a kind of interplay of accident and intentionality in which he was the ultimate master.

Figures



i.1 Merce Cunningham Dance Company, *Roaratorio*, 2011, Brooklyn Academy of Music.



Figure i.2. *Martha Graham in "Letter to the World,"* 1941. Photograph: Barbara Morgan.



Figure i.3. *Second Hand*, 1970. Merce Cunningham Dance Company.



Figure 1.1 *Antic Meet*, 1958. Mere Cunningham Dance Company, costumes by Robert Rauschenberg.



Figure 1.2 *Root of an Unfocus*, 1944. Photograph: Barbara Morgan.

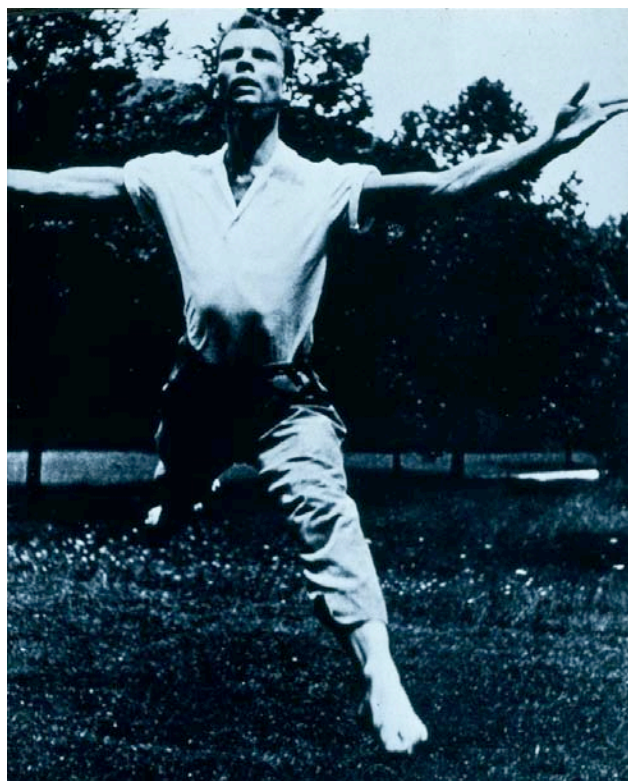


Figure 1.3 Merce Cunningham at Black Mountain College, 1948.



Figure 1.4 *Septet*, 1953. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Photograph: Ara Ignatius.

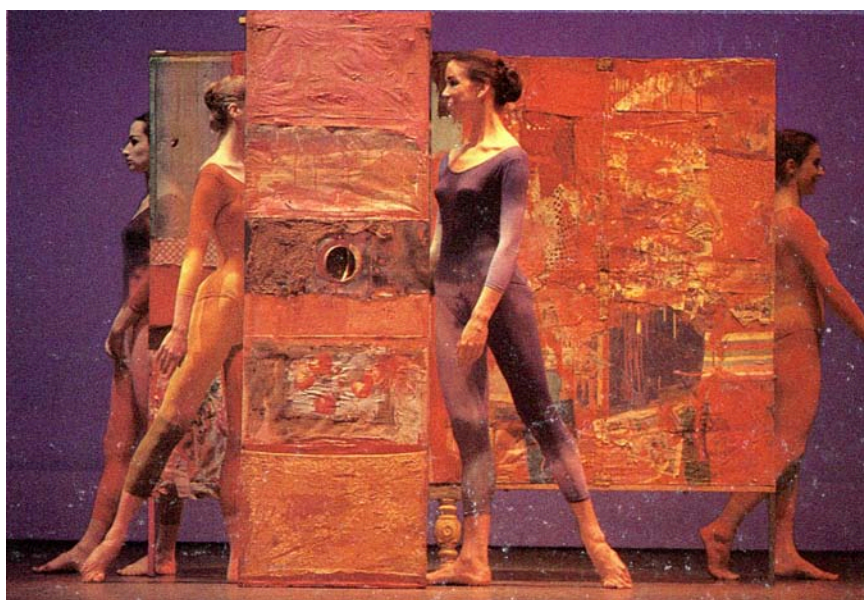


Figure 1.5 Robert Rauschenberg, *Minutiae*, 1954. Combine: oil, paper, fabric, newspaper, wood, metal, plastic, with mirror on string, on wood structure. Walker Art Center.



Figure 1.6 *Antic Meet*, 2011 (first performed in 1958). Costumes designed by Robert Rauschenberg.



Figure 1.7 Charles Atlas and Merce Cunningham, *Ocean*, 1994/2011. Film still.

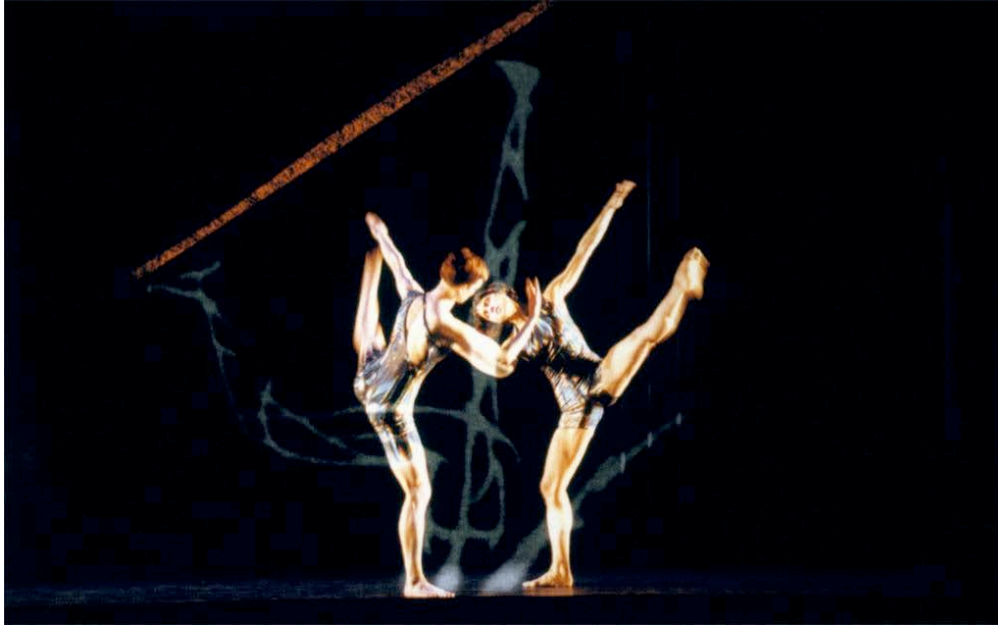


Figure 1.8 *Biped*, 2000.



2.1 Merce Cunningham Dance Company preparing to leave for world tour, 1964.



Figure 2.2 Jasper Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955. Encaustic and collage on canvas. Castelli Collection.



Figure 2.3 Robert Rauschenberg, *Trophy I*, 1959. Combine with oil, wood, old photographs, paint, newspaper, metal, sign, fabric. Kunsthaus Zurich.



Figure 3.1 Willem de Kooning, *Zurich*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 ½ in. Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



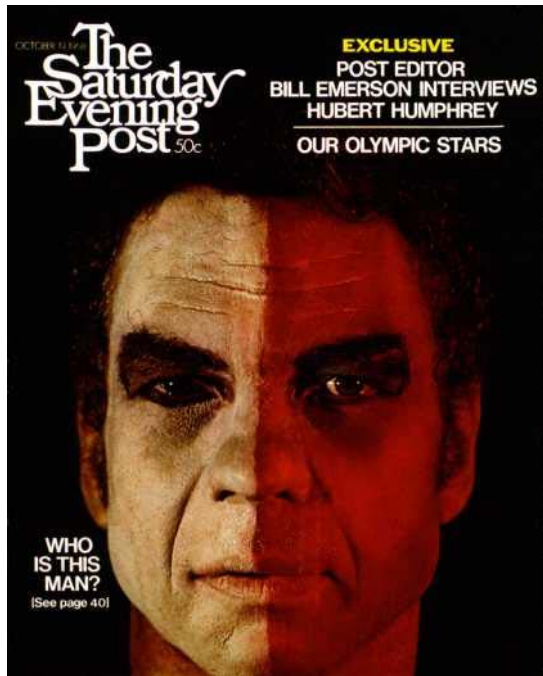
Figure 3.2 Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, 1955. Combine: oil, paper, fabric, painted reproductions, wood, rubber shoe heel, and tennis ball on canvas and wood mounted on four wheels with oil on Angora goat and rubber tire, 106.7 x 160.7 x 163.6cm, Moderna Museet, Stockholm.



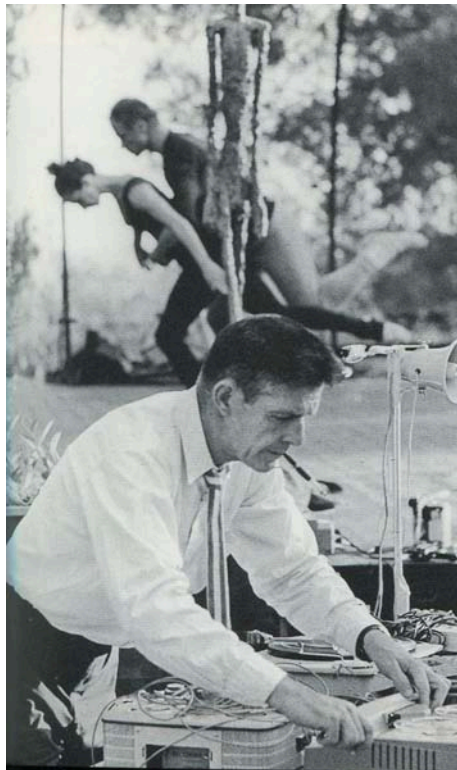
Figure 3.3 *Antic Meet*, 1958. Merce Cunningham.



3.3 *Nocturnes*, 1956. Merce Cunningham Dance Company, costumes designed by Robert Rauschenberg. Photograph: Oscar Bailey.



3.4 *The Saturday Evening Post* cover, 1968. Costume design for *Nocturnes* by Robert Rauschenberg. Photograph: John Launois.



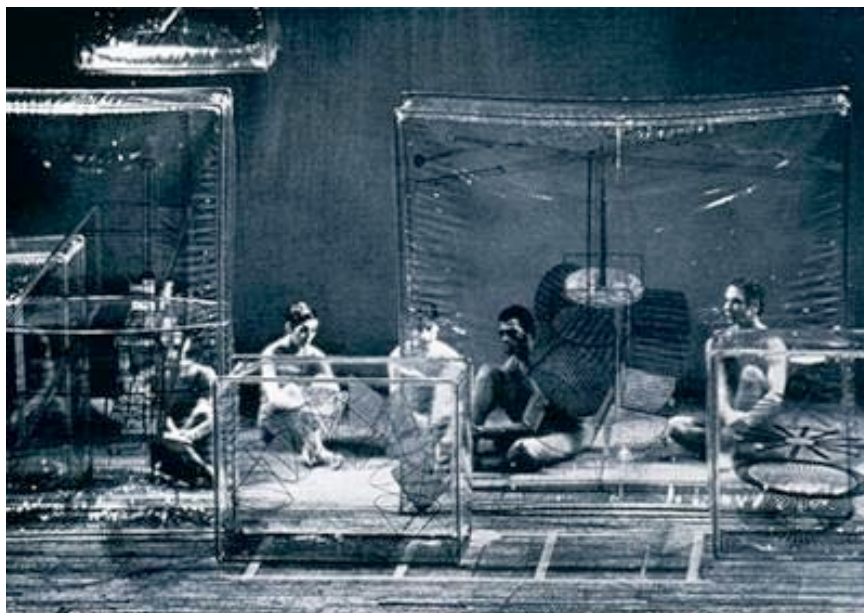
4.1 John Cage improvising sound system at the Fondation Maeght, St. Paul de Vence, 1966.



4.2 *Scramble*, 1967. Left to right: Jeff Slayton, Valda Setterfield, Carolyn Brown, and Chase Robinson. Photograph: James Klosty.



4.3 *Rainforest*, 1967. Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Décor by Andy Warhol. Photograph: James Klosty.



4.4 *Walkaround Time*, 1968. Left to right: Carolyn Brown, Valda Setterfield, Meg Harper, Gus Solomons, and Merce Cunningham. Décor by Jasper Johns and Marcel Duchamp. Photograph: James Klosty.

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